The six primary texts in this collection were conceived around a seventh, unwritten text; the order of experience or the sequence in which they are read (including the choice of texts to include/exclude in the sequence) is intended to determine the (hidden) meaning of the whole.

MARIENBAD suggests one possible sequence; the reader is invited to find others.

‘Cartomancer’ has been altered from its previously published form in ***Kritika Kultura***

‘Saudade, Vera’ was previously published in ***Metro Serye***

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M A R I E N B A D

by Chiles Samaniego

They walked slowly, arm in arm, intermingling with that random and unsynchronized throng of extras cast by Europe's rickety film projector onto the screen of Paris's boulevards every evening.

– Bruno Jasienski

By the third or fourth repetition, 'tear' had somehow translated in her mind to 'rip': at that everything stopped, as if such understanding could be, in itself, a switch.

– M. John Harrison

The Invention of Rayuela

It isn't so much the trains, he says, as it is a particular means of getting from A to B, to X, to Y, &c, onward & onward, as he likes to say, covering as much spatial territory as possible, without necessarily relinquishing the full-upright pre-ambulatory position. He'd get on buses, too, he says, but their greater inherent chaos, their random patterns of movement, more openly susceptible to a wider range of unpredictable but readily observable/unavoidably sensual external influences (as opposed to the relatively intangible forces, he says, that govern a train's route, departure and run times, ETAs, even considering certain trains' predisposition for predictable unpredictability, &c), together with the sitting position one was sometimes required to adopt when riding a bus, radically increases his susceptibility to the vertigo he says he constantly experiences as he stumbles through the world in that way characteristic of/particular to him, Rayuela, the subject of this text.

1

The vertigo he means is, in all probability, not entirely an inner ear thing, i.e., not entirely pathophysiological/non-ontological, though he says the last time he succumbed to a full-blown case of the purely ontological-type vertigo was on a trip he took to Mars about so many years ago by his subjective reckoning. On said trip, about 360 or so long days, almost but not quite a year spent on the infamous *Rosmer,* better known as the Mars Express, designed specifically as an existential experiment sponsored by an occasional (one-time) benefactor, the Casares Philosophical Research Corporate Entity, founded and owned by the monogarchic, enigmatic multigooglaire Faustina Morales, Rayuela was subjected to continuous-loop projections of scenes from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961, dir. by Alain Resnais, script by Alain Robbe-Grillet; starring Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi, Sacha Pitoëff). For months after, he says, the sensual fluctuations of Delphine Seyrig's pale, supple lips haunted him, the tilt of her head, the way she positioned her body, torso bent back at the waist into and away from things, so casually and yet not so much draped as propped up on the cold ornamentation of woodwork, stucco, moldings, marble; the columns, sculptured door frames, doorways; the way her occasional movements destabilized the otherwise still reflections in black mirrors, contrasting or only complementing the cold lines drawn in dark paintings, the heavy hangings in galleries, the transverse corridors that open into empty salons; every turn of the head, every shift of the hips, every crossing and uncrossing of the legs, every bend of the wrist, every movement designed to position herself in stunning, if impractical, magazine cover poses, all uncomfortable angles, axis shifting now and then, center of

gravity forever unbalanced, unstable, waveforms undulating, never collapsing into any kind of particle certainty, her mantra (*Laissez moi, je vous en supplie; laissez moi*) echoing constantly in his ears.

This lingering effect, however, never really concerned him—gave him something other than himself to contemplate, he says, for instance; nevertheless, if he'd known how interminably boring it would be—how interminably boring it would *continue* to be weeks, months, years after he'd left the *Rosmer,* no matter how beautiful he thought Delphine Seyrig was, he tells me, and he thought her exquisitely, incomparably beautiful, he says—he might not have signed up for the study. As if he had that choice; as if there were another option available to him at the time.

2

It wasn't, he assures me, some Kubrickian nightmare, no bodies (not his, at any rate, he says, admitting a limited knowledge of the broader scope of the experiment) strapped to chairs, eyelids propped open on jury-rigs of repurposed orthodontic appliances. Instead, the scenes were projected by invisible projectors onto the tubular interior walls of one of three cars assigned to him (one furnished with sleep quarters, Spartan latrine with bath; one a lounge car with fully stocked bar and pantry to which he could, ostensibly, help himself as he pleased; one, between the other two, empty, the walls completely featureless, the curved surfaces of neutral color perfectly suited to containing in multiple dimensions—not all of them directly observable—the black and white projections of scenes from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*), to which he was confined but left otherwise free to roam as he pleased. The sound was piped into the third, middle car through speakers that were also hidden, and never matched the action on the projections; it was never clear whether this lack of synchronization was, Godard-like, intentional, i.e., part of the film's design, or whether it was the result of a faulty soundtrack. In preparation, someone from Casares he'd never seen before and would never see again had provided him with a lengthy synopsis of the film; the synopsis, however, was in French, a language he did not (still does not) know. He was, as far as he could tell, never shown the whole film, every scene seemingly beginning in medias res and constantly being re-edited by some hidden editor/tireless AI, strung together in random permutations that continued even—he was sure, he says—while he slept, without identifiable beginning or end.

3

In the beginning, once the Mars Express was on its way and following a cursory examination of his temporary lodgings, he sat on the floor in the empty car and, not really knowing what was expected of him, quietly watched the scenes unfold, one after another; later, as the hours wore on, he began intermittently attempting to translate the synopsis based on the action in the projections (the film's soundtrack was also in French, no subtitles provided). Between attempts, he amused himself by supplying alternate dialogue. It was clear that the three main players—the woman, Delphine Seyrig, and the two men, Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoëff, who were to Rayuela interchangeable, none of the actors' names being familiar to him—were involved in some sort of romantic triangle; that, probably, following certain narrative conventions, one of the men was being cuckolded, though it wasn't immediately clear to Rayuela who was doing the cuckolding. Of the other actors populating some of the scenes, easily distinguishable from the main players by mostly being little more than occasionally animated, anthropomorphic furniture, he could divine nothing. As each attempt at translation failed to provide any more information than what he had already surmised in the first 30 minutes of viewing, he spent less and less time trying to understand, and more time inventing his own narrative for the three actors, the alternate dialogue he provided becoming increasingly puerile as time wore on.

That—as far as he could tell, not having been given any kind of instrument to tell time, the view from the perfectly circular viewports (none of them in the walls of the third, middle car, which was entirely windowless) a breathtaking if

apparently constant, immobile field of stars, and nothing for him to mark the passage of time but the shifting light and shadows of the projections of scenes from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad;* the beats of incomprehensible dialogue; the tonal shifts of the organ music which played in the background occasionally rising into off-kilter crescendos in the foreground before fading away again, anticlimactically, thematically unresolved, resolving nothing, into the background, starting and stopping, seemingly at will; the rhythm of his breathing; the beat of his own heart—was the first day. By the end of it, he felt unaccountably exhausted, too tired even to help himself to the contents of the bar and pantry, and he stumbled onto the single in his sleep quarters and drifted into a fitful slumber, leaving the door to the central car open, Delphine Seyrig's husky, half-whispered pleas drifting in after him, *Laissez moi, je vous en supplie. Laissez moi.*

4

The days that followed were, as you might expect, more or less the same: every single subjective/apparent day virtually indistinguishable from any other. Rayuela, always displaying uncanny resilience in the face of the absurd, quickly established a routine that kept him well-nourished, well-rested, occasionally pleasantly buzzed though never drunk, and more or less content, if constantly bored, never seeming to falter in terms of what might in any other situation be called his sanity. Until, about halfway through or a little beyond it on the journey, he became increasingly convinced he was not alone in the three Express cars that were, for the duration of the trip, the experiment, his domain; and then, of course, following certain narrative conventions, he says, he wasn't.

5

Particular scenes provided the only sensation of movement: the Mars Express apparently traveled at a constant velocity, in an unwaveringly straight line; the course was smooth, without any hint of turbulence. These scenes consisted of tracking shots of the cold interior of some enormous mansion or hotel, baroque, lugubrious, something from another century, another time and place; there was a party of some sort going on in the hotel, or a play in intermission; the elegantly dressed revelers/audience members languidly milled about the hotel lobby, in transverse corridors that opened into empty salons, in dismal galleries, in doorways, occasionally stopping mid-gesture, going perfectly still in perfect synchrony with everyone else, only to start again a moment later, completing their gestures while the camera moved slowly on having never stopped, the eye sliding indifferently over them, unbeholden to whatever rule of time presided over everything else.

The narration during these scenes was incantatory, a continuous, occasionally repeating train of words fading in and out of the soundtrack. The narrator was a man, but whether it was Giorgio Albertazzi or Sacha Pitoëff or someone else entirely Rayuela could not immediately tell, even after close examination of each actor's voice. He had, however, by then, identified who of the two men was Giorgio Albertazzi, who was Sacha Pitoëff: the text he had been given plainly identified Giorgio Albertazzi as playing a man known only as 'X'; Sacha Pitoëff played 'M'; by correlating the number of times X and M each occurred in the text in proximity to 'A' (Delphine Seyrig) with the number of scenes each man appeared together with the woman in the projections, Rayuela thought he had determined who was who. (Rayuela, however, while proceeding, so he thought, *logically* from these assumptions, knew better than to allow himself any certainty in this regard: the fact that the film was constantly being disassembled and reassembled in random permutations, without allowing for the knowledge of whether or not any pieces were being left out of the puzzle, whether all of them were being 'used', meant that such statistics were, ultimately, unreliable.)

Both Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoëff were lean, fit men, neither appearing to have an ounce of fat, but their faces were somewhat physiognomically opposed. Giorgio Albertazzi had a handsome, boyish face, the angles soft

around the cheeks; Sacha Pitoëff had the more sharply angular, gaunt, terrifying or only terrifyingly inexpressive face of Boris Karloff's Monster from the original *Frankenstein* film (1931, dir. by James Whale, screenplay by Garrett Fort and Francis Edward Faragoh, based on the composition by John L. Balderston, adapted from the play by Peggy Webling, from the novel by Mary Shelley; starring Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, Boris Karloff). In retrospect, Rayuela thought, it was easy to tell who was the hero, who the villain, if such generic concepts existed in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad.*

Even when Giorgio Albertazzi stood still, broad shoulders held back, there was something restless about him, something brutal, a kind of violence, almost a hunch to the spine, as if in standing still he were merely holding himself taut like a spring, ready to pounce at a moment's notice. It was only with him, and, therefore, Rayuela assumed, *to* him, to whatever admonitions/requests/desires he was voicing, that Delphine Seyrig (A) said repeatedly: *Laissez moi...* &c.

6

Sacha Pitoëff held himself erect with disturbing, cadaveric intensity: a civilized monster disdainful of violent, uncontemplative action.

7

Delphine Seyrig occupied a physiognomic middle ground between the two men: her imperial cheekbones, the delicate line of her jaw and small, pointed chin seemed chiseled from pristine marble; when she frowned, the expression revealed a weary gauntness around the eyes, the cheeks, but when she laughed, when she smiled, always pensive, almost sad, there was a roundness there as well, an endearing softness.

Delphine Seyrig stood deliberately, as though posing for a picture; her movements, too, were deliberate, not a movement wasted, every turn of the head, every crossing and uncrossing of the ankles, every bend of the wrist carefully executed to transform one magazine cover pose into another.

Delphine Seyrig's movements were languid, somnolent, but contained an unmistakable eroticism that seethed beneath each spoken word. *Laissez moi, je vous en supplie. Laissez moi.*

8

Every now and then, the camera would venture outside: outside, an enormous, coldly geometrical French garden, with perfectly straight gravel walkways lined by shrubbery trimmed into perfect cones surrounding a perfectly rectangular promenade; at one end, a classical marble statue of a man and a woman, standing and pointing in ambiguously heroic postures; somewhere, an enormous lake, mountains reclining in the distance, the sky above it all vast, inscrutable. It may have been mid-morning, or mid-afternoon: the garden was strangely lit, the sun shining and not shining; people standing in the promenade cast long shadows that grew almost imperceptibly longer or shorter, vibrating with suppressed energy; none of the ostensibly inanimate objects—not the statues, not the surrounding trees and geometric topiary—cast any shadows at all.

Standing at the exact center of the middle car, absorbed by this scene from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* as it was projected all around him, Rayuela did not notice: neither did he.

9

One day, Rayuela wakes to find X and M playing a game in the next car. It is the first of only two scenes in which he will see the two men interact directly in the series of projections he is shown from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad;* Rayuela is enthralled.

X sits at a table; M stands across from him, one hand casually inserted in a pocket. X lays out a set of matchsticks on the table between him and M: seven sticks in one row (row 1), five in the next (row 2), three in the next (row 3), one stick in the last row (row 4):

The triangle is arranged so that the apex points to X. Each player takes a turn taking any number of sticks from any row of his choice.

M goes first:

X's turn:

M's turn:

X's turn:

&c. The player left to take the last remaining stick loses.

Later, they play the game with rectangular wooden tiles: seven tiles in one row (row 1), five in the next (row 2), three in the next (row 3), one tile in the last row (row 4):

Again, the apex points to X. This time, however, the two men stand across from each other, at a table in what appears to be the hotel lobby, while the other revelers/audience members watch. Still, the game, to Rayuela, proceeds almost identically: the specific moves are different, but M wins effortlessly, both times. They stare at each other portentously: M, perfectly poised, unruffled; X with a look both inscrutable and desperate in his eyes.

10

Having found a stack of photographs in a drawer beside the bed, Rayuela tries to work out the game's secret. Sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, he lays 16 of the photographs down before him as he had seen X arrange the sticks, the wooden tiles: seven in the first row, five in the next, three in the next, one in the last:

[p] [p] [p] [p] [p] [p] [p]
[p] [p] [p] [p] [p]
[p] [p] [p]
[p]

Rayuela sits, legs crossed at the position X occupied in the two games he played with M: at the apex of the triangle.

Rayuela knows the problem is mathematical in nature, but loses track of the game each time, does not know whether it is his 'first' or 'second' player who wins each game, or what strategy was used to win. He understands that, playing alone, without an audience, he is not prevented from inverting the rules of the game, so that the player left to take the last photograph may, without consequence, as well be declared the winner. Of course, in this case, Rayuela plays both sides; either he loses all the time, or he wins. The question is, he decides after a few hours of seemingly endless repetition, therefore meaningless.

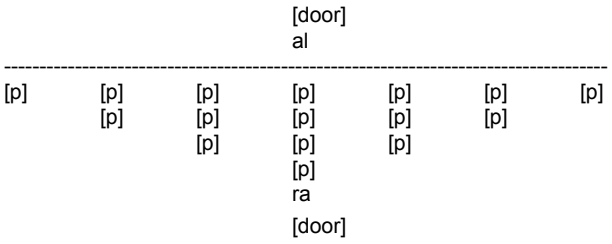
11

In order to recover the game's meaning, Rayuela realizes what he must do. It is days, perhaps weeks before he realizes that the mirror over the sink in the latrine is not fixed to the wall; however, this realization comes days before he finds the stack of photographs he uses to reenact the *misère* game played by X and M. It isn't, therefore, very long before Rayuela has taken the mirror from its place over the sink, propped it against the foot of the bed so that he may sit across from it, the photographs arranged between him and his reflection.

In doing so, however, Rayuela immediately finds himself confronted with another problem: in positioning the mirror almost vertically upright before him, he has arranged the mise en scène such that the reflection includes the arrangement of photographs, so that both he and his reflection sit at the apex (apices) of the triangle(s) they form.

al
[p]
[p] [p] [p] [p]
[p] [p] [p] [p] [p]
[p] [p] [p] [p] [p] [p] [p]
---
[p] [p] [p] [p] [p] [p] [p]
[p] [p] [p] [p] [p]
[p] [p] [p]
[p]
ra

Rayuela immediately finds the obvious solution: by leaning the mirror at an angle of about thirty degrees, then positioning himself about one meter from the foot of the mirror, he confines the reflection to his head, including only his shoulders, and the upper half of the door to the middle car, which stands behind him:



This new arrangement pleases him immensely, having the added benefit of creating the illusion of the reflection standing over him. He even notes with pleasure how his own physiognomy as reflected in the mirror, elongated by the weirdly refractive surface, matches the gaunt features of M.

After several attempts, Rayuela fails to discover the game's secret. Nevertheless, he continues:

"Onward & onward," Rayuela says, smiling lopsided.

"Et cetera," Aleuyar agrees, smiling back.

12

In telling this part of the story, it is unclear whether Rayuela truly understood the implications of the choices he was making, whether each decision—always preferring to put himself at the apex of the triangle of photographs, the illusion he had inadvertently created of the reflection standing over him, his subsequent pleasure at this accidental arrangement, his very ignorance of and desperation to unravel the solution to the game, even his earlier characterization of M, based on little more than appearance, as villain—was deliberately designed to insert himself into the narrative, in the particular role at odds with his almost perfect physiognomic resemblance to the other man.

Having arrived at this understanding, there is no need to let Rayuela proceed: nothing more to be gained, we have taken all we can to deduce the rest of the story, and we may, for the time being, conclude our investigation; it only remains to wait and see if Rayuela himself unravels.

13

Rayuela has somehow lost the stack of photographs, which he is sure he put away in the drawer in the bedside before going to sleep in the single bed the previous night. He overturns the mattress, fluffs the pillow, throws and flicks the sheets, pulls out all the drawers, peers into bottles in the bar, sticks his hands deep into the sacks of uncooked rice in the pantry, enjoys the feel of each and every grain as it presses and slides against the skin of his palm, the volar aspects of his fingers, the pads of the tips. The sensation over the back of his hand remains unattended.

When he returns to his sleep quarters, there is a Polaroid camera sitting on the backside of the overturned mattress. He checks the cartridge: the camera is loaded. He shrugs, sets about creating a new stack of photos for his game.

Rayuela abandons his ransacked quarters, turns, steps through the open door into the empty car where A waits, posing nonchalantly in an empty salon; a bedroom; a vast gallery; a transverse corridor; a doorway; another corridor; a balcony overlooking the garden; the entrance to the garden maze.

Aleuyar, unseen, walks in the opposite direction.

14

Rayuela follows A into the garden maze, taking pictures of her now and then. In the beginning, he takes pictures only occasionally, but soon he is clicking away with increasing frequency, almost indiscriminately; the Polaroid cartridge is inexhaustible. He had only intended to take 16 photos, the number required to continue, begin again his game (7 + 5 + 3 + 1), but soon he is engrossed in his new hobby, has enough photographs to play the game several times over without using a photo more than once.

At first he has difficulty with the camera; the camera has a built-in flash, and each photo emerges a blank sheet of neutral color, a wash of light. Realizing the problem, he first tries to cover the flashbulb with his fingers; the bulb burns his fingers when it fires; he almost drops the camera.

Later, he learns to use a strip of cloth torn from a corner of the bedsheet, wrapped like a bandage around the flashbulb.

Next he learns to focus the camera on the projections: the first pictures are out of focus, A's face a smudge of grey surrounded by a shapeless, inky spot of black. He gets the knack of it quickly enough, captures her perfectly in each Polaroid frame. Later still, he begins making adjustments to the aperture of the lens iris, and he finds he is able to create the illusion of depth; this illusion, however, is limited: after a certain point to either extreme of aperture diameter, the image loses focus completely.

Soon he has enough photographs to make his own version of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad,* recreate the narrative, or create his own narrative in a series of stills (*La Jetée,* 1962, dir. by Chris Marker, screenplay and dialogue by Chris Marker; starring Jean Négroni, Hélène Chatelain, Davos Hanich), but he ignores the photos, looks at them only long enough to register the perfection of each captured moment, the interplay of light and shade, the way A / X / M alternately merge(s) / emerge(s) from the background of garden / salon / hallway / bedroom / doorway / corridor / mirror, before putting it away in a pocket that grows heavier than it should with each photograph, each photo containing an impossible specific gravity all its own.

Back in the garden maze, on the garden path, the heel of A's shoe breaks; she leans awkwardly against X who is standing next to her; they look into each other's eyes.

Slowly, Rayuela brings the viewfinder to his eye; he looks through the viewfinder; positions the crosshairs over the center of the projection, adjusts the focus: click.

When he lowers the camera, he finds M, M's face inexpressive as ever, facing him, Rayuela, obliquely. Suddenly, M turns away, a perfect military about-face, raises and fires a pistol he had been holding in his right hand. Had he always been so armed?

The explosion rings out; M is wiped away by a wash of light.

The organ music begins again; Rayuela had not noticed its absence until now. Now the organ music swells into a swirling crescendo, a piercing cacophony of notes, as though some mad organist had come down hard on all the keys, pulled out all the stops, massive volumes of air come rushing through the pipes, roaring in Rayuela's ears, filling the car with its cathedral of sound, as the universe begins sucking him dry.

The music stops; this time Rayuela notices the silence. The silence drives him, away; he runs, breaks away, runs through a door, and crashes into Aleuyar, who is, of course, running in the opposite direction.

The light goes out; into the silence, Delphine Seyrig speaks. Too late, the vacuum of space has already robbed her of her voice.

15

Upstairs, in her boudoir, A sits cross-legged on the floor at the foot of and facing away from a king-sized bed. Before her, on the floor made of a neutral, indeterminate material, is a set of 16 photographs, arranged in an inverse pyramid. She examines each photograph in turn, an inscrutable pain crossing over the increasingly glassy surfaces of her eyes.

Behind her, the bed lies empty. Near the ornate wooden headboard floats a few tiny spheres of what appears to be a milky liquid. They linger there, their surfaces vibrating in every direction as though undecided, unable to decide, to make a decision, and, in the end, failing to come to a resolution, to resolve anything, resolving nothing, the orbs disintegrate, spreading their milky light into the cold interior of the room.

16

Rayuela sits on the floor of the cell, contemplating the last photograph; he has refused further contact with anyone, refuses to speak, ignores anyone who enters the cell, tries to speak to him or only watches him, even if he were to take up as unobtrusive/noninvasive/unthreatening a position as possible against the wall by the door to the cell, no matter how many times or how reassuringly he tells him he is only here to help, asks him to help, help him help him help himself; he will not play the game with anyone, will not show anyone the photo he holds close to him all the time. He is, at last, bored with us. We are unable to extract the photograph from him; he sleeps with it gripped between his teeth; under heavy sedation, his veins pumped with near toxic levels of muscle relaxant, his body only clenches with the rigor of death.

This just in: a salvage team reports the discovery of what we must now assume is or once was the *Rosmer,* what remains of it, its remains: three cylindrical structures, broken artifacts drifting in a La Grange point between the orbital paths of Earth and Mars. There is no evidence of the improbable rogue quantum singularity the Archives tell us the scientists will say their calculations will tell them had collided with the *Rosmer*, so many years ago.

Of course, none of this is relevant now; or is only of passing relevance, of uncertain and indefinite significance: just another footnote among many such footnotes, a fragile, presumptive lattice of fictitious references, scattered throughout the Archive, dating back to its inception over a century ago, references lacking referent, leading nowhere but a dead end, this man, this blank: Rayuela.

When he recovers from his ennui, as he inevitably will, he will simply stop being there, sat on the floor of the cell. He will, perhaps, return to the trains, going from A to B, to X, to Y, &c, onward & onward, as he likes to say, covering as much spatial territory as possible, stumbling through the world in that way characteristic of/particular to him, Rayuela. He will not speak, will continue to refuse to speak, will say nothing, will have said nothing; his last words, before he escapes us yet again, we have always known, the Archives tell us, will have been: *Laissez moi, je vous en supplie.* And again, harder, more insistent: *Laissez moi.*

Cartomancer

Rayuela, on the trains again. He rides them end to end and back, changing trains only after he's exhausted each line, crossing platforms when the train doors slide open to reveal an interchange, taking a lift or escalator up-level or down where necessary; when he can, he goes against the tide of the masses of commuters that ebb and flow at increasingly predictable intervals over the course of each day, but does not resist if he is carried along with them. He makes little marks with a disposable pen on an awkwardly folded, unfolded, refolded railway map, occasional words already scribbled, many along the periphery, in another hand, some with lines drawn under them, encircled or crossed out, most clustered around the little shapes that indicate stations, landmarks, points of interest: 'shopping mall,' 'condominium,' 'cinema,' 'theater,' 'post office,' 'bus terminal,' 'airport,' 'factory,' 'school,' 'hospital,' 'museum,' 'library,' 'park,' 'garden,' 'mausoleum,' 'food,' sometimes 'good food.' Three words repeat more frequently than others: 'overhead,' 'underground,' 'street level.' Mathematical symbols in lieu of grammatical notation, no 'ands,' no 'ors,' no articles, no punctuation: translating grammar into mathematics, geography into geometry. The process continues: on his third or fourth run, Rayuela begins replacing the words with numbers, erasing the words, both handwritten, his and the other's, and printed, crossing them out with excoriating lines, up and down, side to side, zigzags of black ink. On his sixth or seventh, new symbols appear, hectic arrangements of lines, straight and curved, linear and parabolic; sinusoidal waves appear in one corner, connecting points plotted on the precise cruciform of a graph, x and y axes drawn heavily once, twice, three times; a z line penetrates the owl-face coordinates (0, 0) at an obtuse angle; more sinusoids.

On the thirtieth day he weeps, or appears to weep; he is seen with the map pressed with both hands against his face. Later, a child tugs at the hem of his shirt. He peels the map away from his face, looks down; the face sags, heavy with tears, eyes moist but blank. The child reaches up, offering Rayuela the end of a string; the other end is tied around the neck of a red balloon. The balloon bounces once, twice, three times on his nose. He accepts the string; the child smiles, looks away, starts to hum; at the next stop, the child skips happily away, out the train, through the doors, onto the platform, into the outstretched arms of a young woman in a red cotton dress and canvas, high-top sneakers. The doors slide shut just before they embrace. The rest of the day, Rayuela stands motionless at the precise geometric center of the train (no, not the center, but just a bit off, a few meters nearer the nose of the train, off to one side), holding the balloon by its string. The balloon hovers next to his ear, leaning forward as the train accelerates, back as it stops, occasionally bouncing on the cartilaginous swirls, the labyrinth of the earlobe,

occasionally his cheek; he appears to be listening, that look of remembering; a wry smile forms on his lips; now and then, the smile spreads tentatively across his face, but never reaches the eyes; the eyes remain moist but blank.

On the thirty-second day he begins again, tracing, retracing, crossing and re-crossing his steps; more numbers, more symbols, each more obscure and incomprehensible than the last. The balloon is tied to his wrist. It has started to deflate, the string now tracing a low, sagging arc, the balloon trailing behind him as he enters and exits trains, crosses platforms, rides up and down lifts and escalators. At the end of the day, the balloon scurries wearily along on the ground behind him.

On the fifty-sixth day he is forced to replace the pen. It takes most of the morning to find one with black ink; he settles on a four-color clicky top from a convenience store at one of the stations. The balloon now thoroughly deflated, Rayuela has wound the string around his arm so that the balloon hangs, an empty red rubber bladder, at his wrist. At midday, he stands waiting on a platform, the crowd growing heavy around him. He begins to fidget; the next train takes forever to arrive. A woman beside him screams obscenities into a mobile phone; others around her pretend not to hear, not to listen, not to notice. Eventually they are asked politely to leave the station, take the train in the opposite direction or go down to street level for a bus, a taxi; later, he learns a woman had fallen on the tracks somewhere along the line. For reasons he never learns, it takes the rest of the day to remove the body. A gap emerges on the map, an attenuated layer, a bare spot in the day's sprawl of ink.

That night, Rayuela sits at the end of his bed, staring at the hotel room's distorted reflection on the slick, inert screen of the television set. He sneezes, once, twice, three times; the reflection on the television screen ripples with epileptiform spasms. He blows his nose into a handkerchief. His sinuses throb, adenoids swollen. The red bladder balloon hangs from his wrist like a large, viscous drop of blood, arrested in its fall. The city, burnt orange glow hanging over its dark silhouette, lies waiting/not waiting on the other side of the cold, plate glass window.

On the seventy-ninth day, Rayuela, on the trains again. He unfolds the map completely, revealing a lattice, a palimpsest, this multilayered matrix of numbers, long decimal sequences interrupted by symbols, the lines, the words, the map, the graphical representation of the city-wide network of trains, the city itself obliterated by the mathematics now filling every bit of space, every square centimeter (they use the metric system here, remember) of glossy paper, front and back. He studies the map, the equation, examining the scrawled patterns and symbols, holding it close to his face in the cold interior light of the train, making corrections, amendments here and there. He shakes his head, uncertain, uncomprehending; does not find what he is looking for. He refolds the map, careful to follow the oldest creases, slides it into a breast pocket, leans against a metal pole erected at the exact geometric center of the car (no, not the center, just a bit off to one side); head back, resting on the cold steel supporting his weight with indifference, he shakes his head, stares, eyes still blank, but dry. He exhales slowly, looks around, unseeing. Alfred, lying beside him in the dark almost a year ago now, whispering in his ear: This isn't it; this isn't the city.

The train begins to curve; accelerating, hurtling towards the heart of the city, it traces an incomplete arc.

On the night of the eightieth day, exactly thirty minutes after the arrival of the last train at Central Station, a custodian finds an electronic ticket, abandoned, on the floor of one of the trains. The ticket was last used the day before for entry at Central Station; no record of exit. The ticket contains enough credits for exactly one trip, taken from one end to the other along the network's main line, which runs from the international airport to the border. Security is alerted; all the parked trains, the entire station is swept from end to end, top to bottom. The staff is called together; all on-duty personnel are accounted for; none of them lay claim to the ticket. Off-duty personnel are summoned; no results. Word is sent to the other railway stations, on and off the Central Line; Station Masters are called out of

their beds; the net is cast over the city. Within the hour, the Station Masters report the discovery of one electronic ticket each, discarded on the grounds surrounding their respective stations; 77 tickets in all, one for every station on the four main lines. At 3 a.m., the Minister of Transportation is alerted; the Minister answers the phone on the first ring, voice still coarse with sleep. By 3:15 a.m. she is at Central Station, dressed in the crisp blue executive pantsuit that is the de facto uniform of her office, directing the investigation from the Central Station's Administrative Office, now designated Command Center. The border is closed; all flights out of the international airport are canceled indefinitely. The National Guard is put on alert. Records are examined: all 77 tickets found at stations other than Central Station were used twice, once for admission and once for egress, one ticket a day, almost every day over the last two months or so; no discernible pattern can be divined from the passage of each ticket from one station to another, each ticket used once at the beginning of a day, once at the end; no discrepancies are found. Nothing but that one last electronic ticket, the 78th, that single last point of entry suggesting anything out of the ordinary, that one electronic ticket now resting in the palm of the Minister's gloved hand, fingers curled around that rectangular piece of plastic, artifact of a final trip taken, a journey begun, incomplete, unterminated.

So, Korzybski: 'The map is not the territory.'

Saudade, Vera

Light reflects, bounces off the projection screen in a pale scatter of blue wavelengths, giving the dark space before it a cool, wintery visual aspect, enhanced, augmented, fortified by full-blast air conditioning, temperatures in the low twenties or high teens (in the eponymic Celsius, of course, or the more clinical nomenclature of Centigrade; they use the metric system here, remember), designed to accommodate, level, balance the contrapunctal heat radiating from the presently absent warm bodies intended to populate, inhabit, if only temporarily, the cavernous shadows. The eye, however, discerns full-blooded red on the screen itself, Vera Saudade dancing flamenco against nervous, skittery dubstep beats, rhythms anxious to contort her graceful limbs, feet bouncing lightly, confidently over deep brown parquet tiles set in perfect jigsaw puzzle geometries: Vera, all stammering ballerina heels, languid wrists, sinuous fingers, dark, hooded eyes. Rayuela, bundled in a thick coat sensible only for the inside of this little theater, not the humid late tropical afternoon outside, thinks, is embarrassed by the thought: This is cinema, Plato's pataphysical dream.

Vera Saudade was born only a little over half a century ago and already several worlds away, baptized Desdemona Veronica Cunanan, after a poet grandmother. Monita, as she was then teasingly called, started dancing at the age of six, to the not entirely unpleasant surprise of her parents, themselves celebrated if unpublished poets, struggling in the increasingly unliterary—even anti-literary—world of Santa Teresita, her provincial hometown. Rayuela, who never met her, remembers her at her funeral: she had passed away at the relatively young age of 66, still beautiful in a peculiar, very particular world-weary and weather-beaten way—an odd still-life perfectly restored and preserved in her waxen cheeks as she lay in her coffin—but unnoticed by the once adoring public. The funeral was attended only by close relatives: an adopted son, his wife, an only granddaughter.

At her death, *Volant!,* the film currently being screened with Rayuela the only member of the audience, remained her only known foray into cinema. Made in various locations as an experiment in the mid-60s, *Volant!* was and is willfully incomplete: a jumble of unedited or only minimally edited scenes shot using techniques similar to what would later be called *Tácticas del Cine Guerrilla*, each featuring Vera Saudade and one or two uncredited extras, loosely strung together to suggest but not impose, never dictate an overall narrative, made entirely without a soundtrack. The film was intended for release (and re-release) once every decade, intercut with scenes from one other film contemporary to the period of (re)release, with an equally contemporary musical score.

Left in trust by its anonymous filmmaker (or filmmakers) to the vaults of the enigmatic Rosmer Foundation, this is the film's first and only release in over four decades since its initial 'completion.' As per the wishes of the original

filmmaker(s), the current iteration of *Volant!* includes only two names in its credits: Chris Marker, whose direct involvement with the current production is unclear, even questionable, but whose *Sans Soleil* is in any case quoted extensively in the new edit; and Vera Saudade.

The slightest turn of Rayuela's head is enough to reveal the emptiness of the surrounding space, but of course the theater was never, not once, really empty, Rayuela never quite alone: the ticket-seller sits in her booth, the usher at the door, the projectionist in the projector room, one or two custodians asleep in a broom closet, and Vera Saudade at a table in a café, *Joie de Vivre* in flashing orange neon at the window, on the screen.

Later, an uncredited extra will join her at the table, and the scene will begin.

Vera Saudade has exchanged the red dress for a beige pantsuit, the cut of her slim figure no less exquisite, even seated at such a tawdry, cliché café table. Rayuela, passing, looks through the window, between flickers of neon, watches as her fingers play hopscotch with saltcellar, peppershaker, hop, skip, skip, hop, on the checkered tablecloth.

A moment, but lingering, and Rayuela, not wishing to see more, wanting only to hold the image, that instant, forever—hop, skip, skip, hop—the metallic taste of it bathing the tongue like a sip of wine, turns slowly away, eyes fixating, refocusing on the crisscross lattice of the cracked cement pavement, transposition, patterned overlay of tablecloth, red square, white square, red square, white, onto the sidewalk—hop, skip, skip, hop—and off the grid, onto the street; hail a cab, get in, tell the driver: away!

The driver turns to Rayuela, keeps looking at Rayuela, turning her head away from the streets the old Toyota is rapidly consuming, ingesting, expelling again behind them. 'Frankly, have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say to people as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?'

The city, we've been told, is crisscrossed by trains, tied together with electric wire; today Rayuela remains below it all, at street level. Meanwhile, feet never quite touching the pavement, the eyes go no higher than the sign on the corner, pointing, directing the reader to some destination or other, a cinema, an art gallery, a museum, the name repeated in two or three different kinds of writing, none of which Rayuela can read.

'That way,' pointing. 'Follow that sign,' whatever it says; whatever it is it has to say.

Rayuela almost laughs when the cab driver stops at the T-junction, parking against traffic in front of the immobile signpost, but successfully contains the hysteria. At the foot of the sign sits a Minotaur the radio newscasters had been talking about hysterically all morning, though less obsessively that afternoon, saying it had escaped from a ship that had dropped anchor last night at the harbor, on its way from Africa to New Zealand, or, maybe, Japan.

Its head is lowered in defeat, or only sleep or exhaustion, horns dipping to the pavement, out of respect, deference, or merely civility for the indifferent pedestrians. An eye only half-closed regards the Toyota without curiosity before turning away; an ear flicks intermittently at imaginary flies.

At sixteen, Vera gained some notoriety among the locals of a nameless little town in Spain as the little girl who danced with bulls. Having failed at or simply lost interest in the classical ballet she had been studying for the last decade, she ran away while traveling with her parents in Madrid—or was it Barcelona?—telling herself it was time she found a new way, her own way, to move, to proceed through life, to dance.

An obscure local legend has it that it was the bulls who found her first. They, the bulls, were being run through the streets for some saintly festival or other, the seething, throbbing, sweating human mob not far behind. At midday, the

stampeding herd stumbled over her starved, semi-conscious, frankly dying body; she already, those who tell us they remember say, smelt of decay, though a decay of orchids, a funereal bouquet—the smell that they say permeates the coffins and burial chambers of the virginal, the Godly, of saints. The skirt she wore was soiled, a dark stain still spreading across her bottom; at first they thought that death had loosened her bowels, but instead, they would later decide, prefer to think, repeat to themselves, she was only, even then, despite her condition, menstruating. The discovery had an immediate dampening effect on the hysteria of that day, first on the herd—the bulls immediately arranging themselves defensively around her—and finally on the mob—the men astonished by the placid bovine eyes staring defiantly at them as they round the corner to find before them an unlikely ring of bulls.

While traveling with her parents, she had with her the passport of Desdemona Veronica, little Monita, daughter and granddaughter of poets, but asked for her name that day, she replied immediately, delirious with hunger, but without hesitation: Vera Saudade.

Whatever the truth of the matter, bulls continue to be slaughtered at the end of those saintly festivities, and they were almost certainly slaughtered at the end of that day. Vera's first meal in days or weeks—no one knows for sure—the meal that saved her life, in all likelihood, consisted of the flesh of her legendary saviors.

Maybe it wasn't a Minotaur after all. The sun had gone some time ago, having left the shadows with inscrutable dimensions, though it wasn't yet the dark of night.

Maybe she was never Vera Saudade; maybe the name was meant for someone else. Maybe it was never anyone's name at all.

The night, the city, the streets, the nocturnal occupation of tired, huddled masses congregating in the shadows, waiting, immobile, seizing at what small snatches of sleep they can, the peace denied them by daylight, curiously remind us of some past or future war: small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life. This is what Rayuela sees: night trains, air raids, fallout shelters, memories of fragile moments, moments of fragile memories suspended in time. One walks through it all like a man asleep, someone once told us; maybe it was Rayuela.

'I've never been to war,' Rayuela confesses, reminding us gently, modestly, of the burden of our generation, the enforced pacifism of middle-class suburbanity. 'All we have is the hunt,' this running of bulls, this primal stampede we drive before us, the pursuit always ending in almost but not quite completely meaningless acts of violence. It's times like these that he reaches across the cold for my hand, clutching it between us in the dark.

Vera Saudade, or, more precisely, the woman she plays, loses herself in the labyrinthine galleries, salons and hallways of an abandoned public building—government offices, an ostentatious town hall, or a museum, perhaps; yes, that's what it is: a museum. It is after hours, but she walks boldly, nonchalantly, clearly unafraid of her own unwelcome presence, her illegal, alien status in this place, this hermetic space shut hours ago from the general public. Without seeming to mean to, she somehow avoids the armed guards, lingering ushers, inventory-takers, and sleepy custodians condemned to patrol this landscape of desolation, this sleeping desert of art.

Soon she enters a cordoned area, a small gallery dedicated to the work of an artist whose name she passes with apparent indifference. The artist is known for his unusual, oblique portraiture, paintings of famous and not so famous but otherwise obscenely moneyed people consisting of profusions of literary, cinematic, and historical references, baroque, carefully rendered details obscuring, crowding out the images of their nominal subjects. She stops at one particular portrait, a work that stands out from the rest, being more obviously modern, more recent, overtly contemporary in its techniques and antecedents.

A collage of black-and-white photographs of cities—Madrid, Barcelona, Juarez, Reykjavik, Tokyo, Bissau, São Filipe, San Francisco, Ciudad ning Angeles, Balanga—each taken from a vertiginous height, the camera lens or the photographs themselves faintly tinted a pale, cold blue hue; a solitary red brushstroke, bearing all the weight of the artist's hand, zigzags diagonally at an oblique angle from the geometric center of the upper right quadrant, tapering to its end a centimeter and a half away from the lower left corner of the canvas.

There is recognition in the woman's eyes, the portrait forces her to remember, to rewrite memories, events that had long ago ceased to exist, but she grows pale only upon reading the small metal plaque set below the bottom right corner of this portrait's frame: *Voando Cidades*, it says.

Rayuela, seated alone in the front row center of the darkened theater, nods knowingly to himself, gravely acknowledging the insipid, insidious pun.

The death of Vera Saudade, everyone who remembers her even vaguely agrees, could only have been murder. But no one, investigating either officially or unofficially, has ever been able to prove it, failing even to establish the exact circumstances.

The slightest turn of the head reveals the emptiness of the surrounding space, but of course the theater was never, not once, really empty; a flicker of movement in the corner of the eye causes Rayuela's head to turn more fully to one side; the eyes follow, turning at last from the screen; we see or only imagine seeing a figure retreating silently into the dark. We consider pursuing the figure, real or imagined, confront it outside the theater, in the welcome warmth of the night, but decide to stay huddled in our coats against the cold. There is no need, it is unnecessary to do so: all the evidence we need is up there for all to see, projected onto the silver screen.

In the morning, we ride a cab through the city one last time, passing without comment the still smoldering remains of the theater, the building and everything in it burnt down as recently as the night before.

Volant

She. Wasn't afraid of making mistakes. In fact, she made the same ones, over and over. One might even say she welcomed them, embraced them, familiar friends, if it wasn't that she also, all the time, failed to recognize them completely. Deliberately; or almost. It's not that she was an amnesiac; her memory was demonstrably fine, as she'd demonstrated often enough, when it suited her, when she chose to use it. 'You were here yesterday,' she'd say. 'I saw you watching.' This freed her to metaphorically turn on a dime, something she'd done literally as well, or maybe not so literally, it didn't have to be a dime, didn't have to be any kind of coin, the thing she pressed a toe or maybe a heel, the ball of her left foot against, as arbitrary a fulcrum as any God or the universe or whatever had given her, in the middle of a busy street in September, on a whim. Maybe that's how she got there, even, in the end.

Her philosophy, as far as she had one, was one centered on experience, 'memoryless,' she said, *sans mémoire.* If we're all to die in the end, she said, after all that we've lived, what's the point of remembering? Memory can intensify or attenuate any given experience, she said, or both; why sully it? Why modify, why dilute experience? Isn't it just potent enough to be what it is?

She was, perhaps, more self-absorbed than self-aware. Of course, she never claimed to be otherwise, not one or the other. Not anything.

She was in a coffee shop, having coffee.

She was smoking a cigarette.

She was reading *Ava* by Carole Maso. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* by David Markson.

She was reading *Things* by Gertrude Stein.

We read so as not to be alone. Isn't that what they say?

She glanced at her watch, closed her book. Left without looking back, as alone as she'd sat.

That night I watched *Rosmer* for the hundredth time. Not literally. That night I watched it again, the sound turned down low, in the dark. It was cold, a February; I had a blanket wrapped around me, tucked under my chin, my hands close, fingers cold against my bare stomach beneath the sheets. Before the second act, I turned the TV off, went to sleep.

The next day, I followed her to the river. She walked along it for an hour, pausing briefly now and then, contemplating the waves, the occasional flotsam, following its gentle curve, keeping the sunset well ahead of us. The night market was coming alive around us at last when she turned and walked to the end of a jetty beside the

bridge. A barge waited with a handful of tourists. She conversed briefly with the boatman; he laughed, extended a hand and helped her aboard.

The jetty was too far for me to follow. The boat pulled slowly away. She stood aft, holding herself in her arms. I couldn't tell for sure she wasn't looking at me. Before the boat disappeared round the bend, a man in an immaculate three-piece suit appeared and said something into her ear; she laughed, rocking side to side, turned slowly to face him.

She was reading *L'Amant* by Marguerite Duras. *Histoire de l'oeil* by Georges Bataille.

She went to the cinema. A local arthouse was screening *Enter the Void.* She sat through the whole thing, all 161 minutes of it, her eyes, as far as I could tell in the half-light, never once left the screen, even when the audience was plunged into the remains of a freshly aborted fetus. Most had left by then, and of course by the time we were prodded by Alex's cock, the entire theater transformed into the suddenly vacuous chamber of Linda's vagina, we were all too numb to register more than passing fascination for the enormous throbbing member. 'I came for the experience,' she said. She had never seen a film by Gaspar Noe before. 'I thought it would be in French.' When the lights came back on, only three of us remained in the theater.

Even the hardest of so-called cinephiles had spilled out into the alley behind the theater long before the movie was over; many, shortly after it began. A gang of young men, not all but some of them in mean black leather jackets, stood smoking, cigarettes, pot, crack, something, everything, anything to get the blood circulating through their figuratively chilled veins. (It was June; the heat moist, intense, unforgiving; heavy, cloying in the damp closeness beneath our arms, between our legs.)

She walked between them, through them, pale legs flashing. She paused to regard each young man in turn; weighed, measured them, each with a glance, not disdainful, dismissive, indifferent, though not entirely incurious. The young men looked through her, at each other, through the cumulative fog of their medicated exhalations, their palpable indifference almost deliberate, threatening, posturing; nervous, even. Her back was turned to me, her face in half profile, the pale cheek a partial imprint against the darkness; I could not see her hands.

Later, the young men paired off, peeling away from the brick and plaster canyons, disappearing cautiously into the night, two by two.

She was long gone by then, the flash of her legs a white retinal burn between flickers of neon.

She read to me from *Ava*: 'Female sexual pleasure constitutes a potential disturbance to masculine order.'

She was reading Hélène Cixous. Kathy Acker.

She was reading *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf.

She was smoking a cigarette.

She'd been in and out of hospitals since she was two years old. It had become ritual for her family by the time she was seven, the terror of her feverish convulsions attenuated by repetition. When she became aware of this, she tried death instead; eventually, she stopped having them entirely.

No one noticed. Satisfied, she left home at sixteen. Again, at seventeen. At nineteen, she married a well-groomed man more than twice her age. Left again, six months later.

For a while, she said, a few years or so, she succeeded in disappearing completely. Succeeded, not just in breaking apart her narrative, but halting it, if only temporarily; there was no cure for what she had.

She was in a coffee shop, having coffee.

Capri. Gitanes. Philip Morris.

When I was hired to find her, the Archives sent this description: Petite, thin, bottle-blonde, blue-eyed, female Caucasian.

A month later, the Archives sent a revision: Petite, buxom, black-haired, brown-eyed, female Eurasian.

Then, again: Tall, athletic, red-haired, green-eyed, female of indeterminate race.

The records were revised three more times before I found the first traces of her. By the end of the year, the Archives said only this: Female.

In the end, when I found her, she resembled all and none of the Archival descriptions. By then I had followed and eliminated half a dozen potential candidates on my own, that is, with no help from the Archives.

I haven't heard from them since.

That night, frustrated, I burned all their dispatches: invitations, instructions, descriptions, procedural guidelines, surveillance techniques, suggested courses of action; held them one by one to the fire of a candle. The fire left nothing of the assignment but her; then, when the fire went out, too, my face went dark in the mirror.

She was on a plane to.

It doesn't matter where she went.

I was on a plane myself; didn't stop until I was, at last, home.

Rosmer

We learn very little here at the Archives. It makes no difference if once you enter you can never leave; what I mean is it doesn't matter how long you remain as they say on the premises, encased as it were in this cavernous shell of carved marble, stucco, plaster, varnished old hardwoods. I have been here a very long time, I think, since I woke up this morning at least, I'm sure, but I also think I like to say I remember my very first day: stepping out past the right tree-line of the surrounding woods, I entered through the courtyard, walked round the edges of the perfectly rectangular reflecting pool or shallow artificial lake, past the heroic marble statues, in whose twinned shadows I climbed up the steps to the massive wooden door, that is to say I went in through the back, not that any of that means anything, not that it makes any difference here in this subjunctive Castrovalva, this virtual Logopolis, the porous cliffs shoring up this expansive ancient manse, this lugubrious hotel from another time, another place, punctured by time as much as by design (the cliffs, I mean, but yes, these vast, empty halls, these corridors, alcoves, stairways, doors, pantries, kitchens, salons, galleries, boudoirs—in short: this house, too).

I came with no references, barely a name to myself, nothing to recommend me here other than the desire to maintain this anonymity, this desire not to be named, for we clerks of the Archive are nothing if not nameless; but call me Rosmer, if it helps. Not my name, not by any stretch, but the name by which I'd been given to refer to the agent to whom I am indentured, as close to an identity as we are—not 'allowed', that is not what I mean, for we clerks of the Archive are nothing if not free—as close to an identity as is at all *possible* for a clerk in this place of confused and unaccountable History.

I gave my name at the door and was never given it back. No hardship: as I say, I never wanted it back. I gave my name and was led inside by a lanky custodian-type named Roderick, the butler, the doorman, led by him up the main staircase and down a number of the many halls and corridors and salons and galleries for an immediate interview with our faceless patron, our host, the Castrovalvan. Not right away; first he—that is, Roderick, who I've since learned to love as much as he deserves—asked politely if I might not first like to as they say freshen up; there were 'facilities' devoted to just that sort of thing just down the hall from our host's office, he said, paragon of politeness, that Roderick; moreover, of *eloquent* politeness, his voice endearingly acrid, that is, virtually liquid in its acidity, each word as perfectly enunciated as an actor's, dripping through, penetrating the thick veneer of weariness plastered all over me after the long journey through the woods to this place. Very perceptive, that Roderick, such a sharp, if tactful, eye: I could not help but fail to conceal from him the state of me then, try as I might to stand

as upright as is appropriate for any wretch seeking humble employment in so grand and storied a place as this house—that is to say: straight-backed but not proud, a certain precisely calculated stoop left to the shoulders, but glancing into the varnish of the nearest wall, I could see the ghost of my reflection, could see well enough that the uncut fringe of hair remained pasted to my forehead, just a few stray locks projecting from the crown, and I knew, looking at that faint wood-finish image of me then, that this accidental coif was as good as I could possibly arrange without, at the very least, a proper bath, and there was, of course, no time for that. I didn't smell too bad, either, I thought, so that was fine.

'There's time,' was all Roderick said in reply, such a delightfully bland statement, if I may say so, of the obvious, 'there's time,' of course there is, or rather, time is, how can it be otherwise? so I thought then, anyway, I remember well how it was in those naïve, early days—but no, I said—not of course forgetting to once again thank Roderick for his polite perceptiveness—that would not do; best, I think, I said, if my would-be employer could see me as I was, see what he was as they say getting, and so to make a proper *informed decision* as to my subsequent state of employment.

Roderick only shrugged, or anyway executed a sort of shrug, a slight tip of the head, a cock of the ear, maybe, but blessed Roderick made no further recommendations, the dear, led on, presenting his back, en face, to me, privileging me with respect for personal space and privacy, furthermore eschewing any more elaborate form of communication, the end of conversation.

As I helped myself to a chair, set to waiting in our host's office—where Roderick had at last somewhat regrettably left me, closing the door behind him as though he'd forgotten me already, the darling—I took stock of myself, my few belongings and wondered how much more I would be asked to surrender before the day was done, my fate so they say sealed. As I said, I had already given my name at the door, so much for that; in my pockets I had in total all of fifty pesos, having neglected to have money changed before I left home—not, of course, that fifty pesos would have amounted to much in any other currency at the time; a goodish pair of trousers, jacket—a bit threadbare at the elbows but still hale and well enough suited to these elevated (w/r/t sea-level, I mean, nothing philosophical) climes, cotton shirt (no silks against this skin, alas), all exquisitely pressed for the journey, elegantly rumpled—I was already wearing them, you see—and so now perfectly matched to the rather handsome pair of vintage canvas sneakers I still like to wear, the soles a little more worn now than when I began, understandably; I adjusted my tie, absently checked the time (something o'clock, as always), adjusted the chain and placed the watch unwound back in its pocket; what else? A smallish nondescript leather case, containing one or two changes of clothes—I forget what exactly I had packed, never, after all, expecting to keep much more than the literal if not figurative clothes on my back, maybe not even that, once I was, as I had no doubt I would be, taken on as clerk of the Archives, the clerks being a famously ascetic, in fact almost they say monkishly so, bunch. Having completed this inventory, our host having yet made no appearance, I decided it was time to have a look around, but first, of course, I should consider what it was I would say to our host: somewhat contrary to what I may in spirit have just told dear Roderick, it was clearly not nearly enough to only have myself literally seen as I am—I must also be heard; I must, as they say, make my case.

A door behind me—I could never be sure it was the same one Roderick had previously closed—opened, and through it stepped not Roderick but Faustine—that was her name, I would later learn—gorgeous, gorgeous Faustine, the girl in her elegant little evening dress the spitting image of Delphine Seyrig—her pale, supple lips, the tilt of her head, the way she positioned her body, torso bent back at the waist into and away from things, so casually and yet not so much draped as propped up on the cold ornamentation of woodwork, stucco, moldings, marble; the columns, sculptured door frames, doorways; the way her occasional movements destabilized the otherwise still

reflections in black mirrors, contrasting or only complementing the cold lines drawn in dark paintings, the heavy hangings in galleries, the transverse corridors that open into empty salons; every turn of the head, every shift of the hips, every crossing and uncrossing of the legs, every bend of the wrist, every movement designed to position herself in stunning if impractical magazine cover poses, all uncomfortable angles, axis shifting now and then, center of gravity forever unbalanced, unstable, waveforms undulating, never collapsing into any kind of particle certainty. Yes, so very much like the Delphine Seyrig all of us from where I was from at the time laughably liked to think we knew, that Faustine.

She was enchanting, fascinating, entirely captivating, was Faustine; I was appropriately, or should I say suitably, transfixed. Yet I could not help but notice the fact that the house she led me through was transformed—not *per se*, as they say, not necessarily, but certain aspects had changed. The halls and corridors and stairways and galleries and salons had been empty when lovely old Roderick led me through them, as though he had walked me through the lobby of a theater in the middle of a play, and now that play must have ended while I waited for our absentee host, or was in intermission. In any case, now it seemed there was a party of some sort going on in the hotel, with elegantly dressed revelers now milling languidly about the place, in the lobby, in transverse corridors that opened into empty salons, in dismal galleries, standing in doorways. Occasionally they stopped mid-gesture, going perfectly still in perfect synchrony, only to start again a perfect moment later, completing their gestures as Faustine walked me perfectly indifferently past them, unbeholden to whatever rule of time presided over everyone else.

As she led me through the house, Faustine's narration was incantatory, a continuous, occasionally repeating train of words that faded in and out of the noise of the party, but I could hear her clearly enough to eventually come to the understanding that she was—unnecessarily, I might add—explaining to me my duties, now and again repeating, I suppose, the most salient points of my instructions. A decision had been made after all in our host's absence: I was now an acknowledged part of that as they I would soon learn erroneously say monkishly ascetic bunch: a clerk of the Archives.

At the end of my guided tour, which terminated at a balcony overlooking the marble statues I had passed that very morning, a man and a woman, standing and pointing in ambiguously heroic postures, Faustine introduced me to Rosmer: a handsome, youngish man, physiognomically the diametric opposite of the impassive, dignified Roderick, rounded, boyish features softening a squarish, masculine jaw, all set around a brooding, scheming, roguish pair of eyes. He stood perfectly still at the marble balustrade, contemplating, I suppose, the view: a coldly geometrical French garden, with perfectly straight gravel walkways lined by shrubbery trimmed into perfect cones surrounding a perfectly rectangular promenade, the long sides tilting at the unmarked vanishing point somewhere in the mountains reclining in the distance.

Our presence on the balcony eventually broke Rosmer's reverie: 'Ah,' he said, giving me a warm, approving sort of smile, 'shall we begin?' He took me companionably by the shoulders and led me back inside the house. I turned to say goodbye to Faustine; she, however, it seemed, had already forgotten us, having already taken Rosmer's place at the balustrade, hip thrust elegantly, vivaciously and perhaps also a little barbarically against it, a faint half-smile on her lips as she stared down, chin to clavicle—or as close as the taut tendons in her neck would allow—into the promenade or courtyard below, where people stood, casting long shadows that in the strange light grew almost imperceptibly longer or shorter, vibrating with suppressed energy; in that odd light, none of the ostensibly inanimate objects—not the statues, not the surrounding trees and geometric topiary—cast any shadows at all.

'Given what I've learned of the subject, I've found it useful to make a close examination of the trains.' Rosmer's company was easy and—characteristically, I would soon enough learn—completely invigorating: not once during his report did I feel imposed upon, and what difficulty there was in executing my duties was easily resolved by

little more than now and again interrupting his buoyant narration to ask him to repeat an unfamiliar or only vaguely familiar word or phrase once or twice to make sure I understood correctly: 'Rayuela – Rah-yoo-well-ah.' Laughing at my puzzled expression, he wrote the name down for me. 'Means hopscotch,' he added, not really as helpful as he seemed to think.

'Here, put that pencil down; put it down, for God's sake'—Rosmer, reaching to take the eponymous item from me as if I weren't already quite eager to comply; I had in the last half hour or so become all too aware of the ache in my wrist— 'let's play a game.'

From an inside pocket of his jacket, he produced a box of matches and, counting 16 matchsticks from the box, began arranging them in a pyramid, each row containing a diminishing odd number of sticks, seven, five, three, one, on the table. 'I haven't quite got the knack of it; maybe you can help. The objective is to get the other fellow to take the last stick. Here, I'll go first.'

We played a few rounds; he won a few, I won a few; soon enough I did figure it out and started winning more consistently. We played a few more rounds; his frustration mounted, became visible in the way he glared at the sticks in preparation for each move, and, to as I thought relieve some of the tension, the pressure building up visibly, even tangibly, in his chest, the arches of his spasmodically flaring nostrils, I let him win. With a violent gesture he swept the sticks off the table; I thought he would overturn the table, too, but a moment later, holding the edges of the table to steady himself, he took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. 'Again. Properly, this time.'

We played again: I won. After a few more rounds, he had recovered his previous joviality, despite never winning another round. 'Well done! When I return, you will of course teach me the game's secret.'

I said I could teach him now, if he liked, it was your basic misère game, each 'correct' move determined through simple binary summation. 'No, we've done enough for one day,' laughing, 'very good work. I'll be back again in a fortnight. You will, of course, file the report tonight?' I agreed that that was indeed as I was briefed by Faustine, whom, I suddenly realized, I was eager to see again. But it was Roderick standing outside the salon with my case, the item having ostensibly been retrieved from our host's office, where I had forgotten it at the sight of Faustine, waiting to take me to my room.

Rosmer looked stricken; he took the case from Roderick and emptied it onto the floor of the hallway. 'Is that all? Nonono, no good; that will not do. My friend, you have been listening to stories!'—taking a quick visual inventory of the items on the floor—'Three days, then'—laughing again, walking away—'I'll be back in three. No need to file a report then, I'll simply make a quick supply run, have everything you need, three days, no worries' —down the hall, past a group of fashionably dressed strangers, a few stragglers nodding to each other as the night wore on, laughing elegantly, turning a corner, Rosmer gone.

Roderick, impassive as ever: 'In your own time.' I gathered my things up under one arm and gestured for him to lead the way.

That night, long after I had filed the report, even when it was therefore too late, it was, of course, impossible to sleep, just as it was inconceivable not to; I was as they say plagued with questions. Had Rosmer said there was 'no need to file a report then,' or 'no need to file a report, then'? Exactly how consequential were three days to the Archives? What exactly did three days mean here? I had no idea how time was measured in this place, or more to the point how a count of three days here translated in what I still thought of as the outside world, if there was even a difference, and if it mattered. In Rosmer's report we had accounted for at least ten years of History, a decade, in an account of what I thought an exhaustive search for the subject Rosmer had both successfully located and but also not yet even begun to identify, but when I checked the Archives I discovered that Rosmer's last report was filed by my predecessor no more than a year past the following morning; how was I to extrapolate the significance of three days from this information? I realized I had not yet supped, had not, in fact, had anything to eat since I arrived.

‘I was just a kid, seven, maybe eight—no, I was seven, I’m sure; I have an unusually clear memory of all the most significant events that transpired that same year. It wasn’t as you might think a so-called fear of the needle; I walked into the doctor’s office with absolute confidence that the needle could bring no pain I couldn’t handle—although of course then again I had never before had blood taken from me—but exactly as I expected the pain was nothing to me. It was in the exact moment that I saw the blood being drained, *escaping* from my body, the readiness, the eagerness with which it began to fill the syringe, that all at once I found it impossible to keep the tears from running down my face.’ The woman started talking when I entered the empty salon or gallery, the heavy hangings, dark mirrors, tapestries or portraits invisible in the dark; she stood leaning against a high window, a cloud of mist in the glass before the space where her lips must have been, pulsating with each word, every breath taken facing away from me. I was sure it was Faustine and, yet again, I could not possibly have known if it weren’t someone else entirely: at this hour, I found, the halls were still not entirely deserted; music could still be heard seeping through the closed doors of at least one of the galleries I passed on the way. I was sure it was Faustine, and yet I couldn’t for the life of me recognize the voice I was hearing, as fresh as the memory of Faustine’s voice heard that very morning had been, as it still is today; it seemed so much older, that voice, so much more weighted with years, and yet also almost as light and youthful and naïve as the child in her story might have sounded were she there in that room to tell her tale herself. I wanted to reply, I realized I had not yet spoken one word to Faustine since we met, but again I could not entirely be sure there wasn’t, as I had begun to suspect, someone else in the room, that she was not in fact directing these words towards my person, that she had not after all somehow immediately sensed my entrance, my hesitation to approach when I arrived, as I first thought: I said nothing. ‘I was just a kid, seven, I’m sure I was seven, only seven, and the sight of my own blood escaping into a syringe had somehow brought me to hysterical grief, as though I were an old woman in mourning. I was ashamed of my tears, yet I could do nothing to stem their flow. I just sat there, weeping silently as the doctor took my blood; he too seemed embarrassed by my tears, but as I said nothing, neither could he find the words to reply; somehow he knew none of the usual words of assurance, *there, there*, *not long now*, *just a pinprick*, *just an ant’s bite*, et cetera, were at the time appropriate in the conventional sense, the way they might, with another child, otherwise be; so we just sat there, as if in tableaux, as the doctor completed the phlebotomy. No, it wasn’t the pain, and for a long time after I explained to myself that it was a direct result of a precocious awareness of my own mortality—I had always, for as long as I can remember, been so very afraid of death, in fact *deathly* afraid, so afraid that sometimes I would curl up in a corner of a favorite cupboard in my grandmother’s cottage and hold myself, as if I were trying to hide from my mortality, as though my very first thought had been a realization of my own finitude, as though it were that realization that shocked me into full consciousness, bringing me into complete self-awareness in that one single precise instant. But it wasn’t that; now I believe it wasn’t that at all. It wasn’t mortality that made me weep; as I said, I’d always known I would someday die, that my life would eventually come to an end; I’d already had seven years to come to terms with that fact; instead, I now believe it was the mechanics of it, the way the simple act of phlebotomy summarized me, my body, the deconstruction it represented, the way it took me apart and revealed to me the absolute independence of each of my essential components, how the vitality of each component was independent of me, of what I thought of as my Self, my then suddenly abjected Being, the self-awareness, the consciousness suddenly somehow made a victim, an object of mockery to the material reality of a body...No,’ turning her head slightly, but not looking back, ‘no, don’t touch me, don’t come near, *laissez moi, je vous en supplie; laissez moi...’*

There was a movement in the shadows; having remembered my hunger, I had already left to continue my search for the larder.

The house was impossible to navigate; I was completely turned around. Three times I think I passed the same set of rooms, galleries, salons, the same portraits in the same halls; heard the same music issuing from under doors, occasional laughter on the other side; there were still some people milling about, unmindful of the late hour, though I never passed the same group twice and, though I soon began to think better of having left, I could not find my way back to the gallery in which Faustine stood contemplating the moonlight.

My hunger began to grow insistent within me, a cold, acid sickness spreading from my gut to permeate my joints, my limbs, invading, occupying my mind and making every thought an essay, a lengthy discourse on the singular theme of Food. My mind began to recontextualize everything I saw around me, every sensation, every sound/smell/sight, every portrait hanging in every gallery, every reflection in every dark mirror and every polished dark surface, every stranger's physiognomy rendered an Arcimboldi concatenation of delicious, ingestible succulents: that gentleman's banana nose; that elderly lady's pair of ripe, juicy overturned halves of papaya; the exotic hams; the way they all laughed, giggled, hissed, the way their glee sizzled like delectable meats on a grill. This was new: I was not, after all, unfamiliar with the concept of hunger; I have known in my childhood long periods of starvation, at the orphanage, on the streets, even at the boarding house, the old hospital, my adoptive home; never had it ever affected my wits, brought me any kind of unhappiness. To be utterly reduced as it were to my knees by *hunger:* this was unheard of; I had no defense against such a betrayal, such an unfamiliar onslaught from within. I found myself in a long empty corridor, and in the wall, a door; in my desperation, forgetting all notions of propriety, I began knocking, hammering on the panels as though my very life depended on it—as in a very fundamental sense it after all did. Each knock was a precious moment, another modicum of vitality slipping away as the corridor seemed to darken further around me, but it was only that the door had opened at last, and in the light from the candle in Roderick's hand shadows lengthened, deepened.

'Dear Roderick, you glare at me, it pleases me that you would look me up and down like that for you have every right to do so! In your demeanor, your posture, the slight sluggishness of your physiological responses, the way your eyes remain just so, a bit glassy despite your obvious intelligence, struggling towards clarity as your pupils make frantic adjustments in their diameters—now bigger, now smaller as you are forced to take in the no doubt unwelcome sight of me—the way your dressing gown hangs, if I may be so bold as to point out, revealingly open from your shoulders—go ahead, sir, take your time tying that fine silk band around your waist, no need to be embarrassed—it is, after all, I who have intruded upon what I can plainly see in the happily deposited grit around your eyes—no, don't rub them away, I can plainly see in them the remnants of a particularly agreeable dream, now never to be recovered, the precise details of which my behavior I understand has, to my deepest regret, forever barred me from knowing. How precious they seem to me, the grit in your eyes! No, no, spare me, spare us both your polite greetings, your good evenings and how-dos, they deserve better ears, we both know my behavior has been most execrable, utterly distasteful, such a vivid slap in the face of all propriety! You are perfectly within your rights to be disagreeable, to slam the door in my face. Indeed, that would be the most sensible thing for you to do, to show me what-for by closing the door on this unseemly proboscis, immediately turning the key on the inside to be rid of me once and for all—in fact, I might have done that very thing by now should circumstances have seen fit to reverse our respective positions. But, I'm sorry to say, circumstances have not seen fit to do so, and we find ourselves here, standing just so, with me having just hammered so obscenely at your door, and while entirely justifiable, such a belligerent response is clearly beneath you, while I so clearly lack the reserves of dignity and, what's more, *civility* you so obviously hold in vast reserve within your incomparable soul. Yes, I'm glad that you glare at me, so honestly, that you continue to look me up and down as you are fully entitled to do, for, as impetuous as you must already have guessed that I am, it gives me courage to speak my mind and, as I have already wasted so much of your time,

rather than slink away into the shadows as it were, as weak and cowardly as I have ever been, instead attempt to satisfy you with some explanation, however inexplicable, for my actions. It is, you see, madness. Yes, of course, you may laugh, *madness*, you think, that's obvious, who but a mad man would be making such a row at someone else's door at such and such an hour as this—something o'clock, by my watch, in case you were wondering—but this madness, you see, is no simple matter. It has, I endeavor to suggest, reasonable cause, for you see, far be it for me to even suggest that any burden of fault might be laid as they say on your shoulders—that is, of course, clearly unthinkable—this madness stems from the nonpareil efficiency with which you have conducted yourself today. Uncouth youth that I am, I am unaccustomed to such orderliness and efficiency, but that is good, too. I am justifiably most grateful for this exposure to such unfamiliar powers and abilities, for it has pushed me to perform to the utmost of my own disorganized, haphazard but I assure you by no means inconsiderable capabilities, thereby, unfortunately, neglecting to address my own shameful inadequacies. You see, as willing as I have been today, as strong as I have tried to make my will, the flesh, my dear Roderick, needs to eat. I need to eat, have always needed to eat, all my life I have been burdened with this necessity. Now I will not insult you by assuming you need further clarification. It is, after all, as they say, not your problem, you have already gone as they say far beyond the call of duty to stand there listening to me, and so allow me now to beat a dignified retreat by bidding you adieu—good night!—and by so doing leave you to recover in turn what you might of this night's remaining ration of slumber.'

I hastened to depart; Roderick stopped me. 'This way,' closing the door behind him, 'larder's *this* way.'

We descended; Roderick led me down, down into the deep, deep bowels of the house, climbing down past the marble floors, down the winding stone steps rendered dangerous, polished, and slippery by the frequent feet of the battalion, an army of cooks and serving boys and serving girls, bussing supplies back and forth, up and down as they labor invisibly to keep the house above alive; down he led me into cool, moist caverns and dry as dust caves, the secret heart, I thought, of these mountains. But of course: where else would the larder be? Where else would they keep these fine, massive hocks of black pig ham, the raw, membrane-thin slices melting in my mouth, against my lips: Sweet Roderick!

'I was a hunter before I came to the house, I would stalk wild pig, deer, game fowl, whatever I could find at the time in the wooded lands surrounding our village. Back then there was no need for permits. You could stalk and kill what you liked. Back then you lived on what you grew, what you harvested, or what you killed—there was no other way to live. My grandfather was a blacksmith, the only one in our village, but he would have gone hungry, we would have gone hungry, if he did not also hunt, using a fine hunting rifle he built himself for the very purpose of providing meat for the table. He could fell a water buffalo with a single bullet between the eyes, in dense foliage at a hundred paces, he liked to say. He had sharp eyes as well. I myself have only done it once, with the very same rifle, the rifle I inherited when I came of age. My grandfather was the finest hunter I have ever known. I myself was not so bad, I took up the rifle for good when my grandfather died and I did what I could to provide for my mother, my sisters, my father having long ago abandoned us to be a poet in some distant city. I was teaching my younger sister to hunt when the war came and took them, took them all, took most of the village, too, I was teaching my sister to hunt so I could leave, and when the war took them I left right away, there was no need to bury any of them after the war, the war saw to that, I left, bringing with me only the rifle so that I could hunt and kill and feed myself, survive on my own in the world outside the village, first around the jungle-enclosed fields where my people were taken during the war, where they disappeared for ever, then in the greater world beyond, where my people were even then already unheard of, vowing also to roam the earth in search of my father. But when I came at last to the city, they told me I could not be a hunter anymore, they had regulations, they said, it was not civilized for a man to live on what he killed. So I put away my grandfather's rifle, sold the last thing I killed—a magnificent black stag that I hunted for

eight days and nights before entering the city—to a rich man who had its head mounted over his mantle, and with the money bought myself the finest suit I could afford'—Roderick, wielding the knife with great skill, cutting out fine slices of ham as though he were whittling, carving the ham into a shape only he could yet see—'I taught myself to live as civilized men were said to live, trading the work of my hands, my hard labors for currency, with which I was told I could buy myself what I liked, but I bought little that I didn't need, I didn't find much I liked, or that I would like to buy, and so accumulated a tidy sum, never knowing what to do with it in the end.' He didn't say anything else after that. What's more, I would have said, Dear Roderick, no more! I would prefer not to hear any more about you, who you are, where you are from; this is not the way to know someone, to know someone as intimately as I wish to know you! I would rather instead think of you as I have now always thought of you, as the dear sweet Roderick of this house, the Roderick who, twice now, had so politely and generously opened the door for this wastrel soul!

But instead I was too busy savoring the meat, the succulent fat dripping on my tongue, and anyway it all sounded suspiciously like something I'd heard before, something I'd read, maybe, in the days when I still read, before reading became too much trouble, a burden I couldn't be bothered with. There's so much more to the world than the inside of a book, than the words on a page can contain, there was too much world, too much to see, too much to live to be cooped up reading a book by a window, looking out, seeing all of that too-much world pass you by, while you remain, cozily tucked into the pages of a book. I don't like things to coddle me; towards the end, I could feel books coddling me. I'd read so many and yet there were always so many more I hadn't read and, what's more, couldn't read, all of them so welcoming even as they lay stacked around my bed read and unread and bought and borrowed and lent and stolen snuggling up to me, walling me in while the authors, those invisible, unknowable strangers, ceaselessly caressed me, tempted and teased me with their pretty and not-so pretty words away from the too-much world that I began to long to see, to live, as they say, first-hand. I began reading with my eyes closed; I could feel my eyes beginning to close as I read, until the day came when I could not keep them open, yet still for a long time after that I continued to read, and so read on and on with my eyes closed; at last the day arrived when I came upon a book that, at long last, opened my eyes again, and, with eyes wide open, I found I could not read any more.

That was when I decided to leave home, and not just decided but actually left, that very day saying goodbye to everyone I knew, or anyway saying goodbye to them in my head. It was too much trouble to actually go and find them all and say goodbye; it was enough I thought to think of them, to think of saying goodbye to them as I stepped through the door that would never open for me again, or that would stay open forever behind me, waiting in vain for me who would, of course, never return, to return would be unthinkable, I was never going to see any of them again, I thought, what difference did it make if I said goodbye or hello? I took with me little more than the clothes on my back—the little leather case, fifty pesos in my pocket, a name I was all the more ready to give away —through the streets lined by weeping acacias, the acacias were weeping, shedding their leaves, raining them down on me so that the well-paved roads at my feet were layered with a soft, rustling carpet of dead or dying leaves, and I left home, left behind those gated communities and went walking through the too-much world.

And beyond the gated communities, cities; beyond the cities vast fields, empty wastes and farmlands, swamps and forests and hills and mountains and lakes and rivers; and seas! The seas I have crossed, walking on the decks of great ships, huddling in cluttered holds, hemmed in by great steel hulls, their impossible weight borne impossibly easily on the backs of tremendous, powerful waves that raised us up into endless clear skies, endless blue or endless grey or endless black speckled with infinite stars.

It wasn't all aimless wandering; as much as I loved it sometimes, there were other times when I found the tedium of such a pointless wandering existence overwhelming, and the so-called wastrel life can be so very tedious! Might as well sit by a window reading a book, I would think at such times, and I would find my way into some kind of so-

called gainful employment or other. I would take on odd jobs, occasionally also taking on more steady work, though I rarely stayed long enough to be paid on those occasions when I found myself doing work I felt I could easily end up doing for the rest of my life—what a waste that would be, what a waste of all the potential I knew I had inside, the potential I knew even then everyone of a certain personal standard must have inside! And I would look at my colleagues—not all of them; some I would envy for their lack of such potential, for it made them so perfectly suited to whatever work they were doing at the time, or whatever work I knew they would soon find to do; how restful it must be to lack this potential! To be content—but, then again, how sorry I felt for my colleagues who clearly held within them the same potential, and yet continued to squander away that potential, seemingly oblivious—but surely not!—to the possibilities they were failing to explore as they carried on, as they say, 'making a living.'

Now and again I would travel with one or two such former colleagues as a companion, never more than that, the ideal number being two, three being only rarely beneficial, more than that an obvious burden to our so-called lifestyle, yet all of us are so insubstantial, our identities rendered irrelevant by this potential, that I remember only one of them well, though of course I've forgotten his name, names mean so little to us, to such people as I am, but that one man so clearly had such potential, so much more of it, in fact, than I had ever seen or would ever see again in any one single human being, not even I had such potential. We traveled together briefly, virtually inseparable, we were so well-suited at the time to each other's company, we were like brothers, and looking upon him with love one night as we slept side by side under the stars I was suddenly terrified by it, how his potential lingered so visibly limning his peaceful sleeping face – we who have this potential rarely sleep with such peaceful faces, we are all always so impatient to get sleeping over with so that we can get on with looking around us, such potential being a terrible slave-driver, burning us constantly, searing our flesh with its fiery brand from within, and it terrified me to see his face that way, so peaceful despite the fire burning so fiercely within; I felt the almost but not-quite irresistible urge to wake him that very instant for fear of seeing all that unimaginable potential burn away before my very eyes, but then I realized he in fact had so much of it that he could, unlike anyone else I'd ever met before, or met since, think little—no, nothing, in fact—of squandering it away without ever having to worry that it might run out, or die inside of him, or waste away unused. Realizing this, I lay back on the dewy, fragrant grass, the edges of each blade soft against the tips of my earlobes because they had never been cut, never known the iron blade of a lawnmower, the same jacket I was wearing when Roderick opened the door for me bundled up behind my head for a pillow. I fell asleep.

One day after we were still traveling together we came upon a clearing in the hilly countryside we were traversing on our way between cities, a small clearing in the woods, a dry copse of some sort, almost perfectly circular as though tended by the surrounding stones, two or three of them, almost completely overgrown, concealed by the undergrowth, erected long ago by some lost civilization. At the opposite edge we found the dried up body of a man, lying as if in repose, head laid to rest on a leather rucksack, perfectly preserved, perhaps by the weather, the cool, gentle climate, perhaps by some divine intervention, left entirely untouched by the wildlife inhabiting those woods, perhaps by some poison, still potent though now completely dried up in his veins, a guardian at rest – were the man alive he might have barred our way—but there he lay, then, dead, merely inviting us to pause on our journey and consider his fate. 'Simon,' my companion said, 'O Simon, I remember you well. How pleased you would have been to have known your fate would have you lying here today, to have died beneath the wild sun, the stars unobscured by the nocturnal stain of human habitation! But who are we to say you did not know your fate, that your fate was not in fact contrived, designed, and ultimately achieved by your own mind, your own hand, a hand that lies now, peacefully, resting upon the empty glass vial my sister had given you on the day you learned of her betrothal. The poetry you would have written about this day, the way we find you now lying so peacefully before us, as though

you were only asleep, were it not for this blanket of stillness, the rictus of death spread like a mask over your once elastic, expressive face.' My companion and I were impressed by the manner of his death, so elegant, so well-chosen, so appropriate for one such as we imagined we ourselves were, the same fire that burned within us having now consumed the man before us so completely that it left nothing but this dried-up husk of once-flesh. Briefly we considered spending the night with the dead man, telling stories round a fire we would keep burning until dawn, as was the custom around those parts those days, but then my companion found the papers folded neatly in one of the pockets of his coat, the last and therefore the dearest poetry he ever wrote, and we decided together that it would be better tribute for us to make haste for the next city, to have his poems published under his name.

It was all so very much like something I'd read before, back in the days when I still read.

Some mornings I would wake remembering those days, those nights, the lullabies the grass whispered directly into my ears, and, after a long bath and a light breakfast, I would set out, leaving the house to explore the surrounding woods. Every now and then I would find an agreeable patch of grass off the paths where I could lay my head down and stare up at the sky racing by through breaks in the canopy, examining the endless fractal geometries of trees, branches, leaves and sky, hidden by the shrubbery, thus rendered invisible to the rest of the world; allowing myself an idle hour or two lying just so, as still as my restless, constantly burning limbs would allow, I would let my thoughts go where they would, nowhere important, fluttering about like butterflies in a gentle breeze; sometimes they would alight on Roderick, making me laugh in delightful seizures of irrepressible hysteria; sometimes on Faustine, and I would let myself out slowly, unfurling in a long satisfying sigh.

Sometimes I would think of poets and painters I've met, some of whom I've known all my life, how they would envy me such moments in the grass, how perfect would their renderings of such moments be, each in his chosen medium—but how inadequate! Roderick had himself been a painter once (I learned against my wishes one day)—how else could he find a poet, he said, his father, the father he was still searching for, still had not found, not himself being gifted with words the way his father had once jealously fancied himself to have been—once he let me into his room, it was impossible not to see the evidence before my own eyes: what a gifted painter he had been!

The way he had with color was almost completely beyond my comprehension!

Amidst Roderick's collection of paintings, a single portrait stood on the floor against the wall, at the center of his collection, as if his paintings, his art, could be said to have had such a center, as though they could share a singular theme, a core metaphor, though it was obvious they did not, despite each being a perfect representation of some aspect of nature, that is, of the same natural world, yet each one was so very different, expressing, perhaps, a completely different mood, a different collection of energies: swamplands, rice paddies, mountains; a storm brewing in the distance, mangroves shredded by a typhoon on the far horizon; a field of grass caressed by a completely different kind of wind, a gentle but insistent breeze; a lake, mirroring a blank early evening sky, the surface perfectly still, as though it were instead of a lake only a puddle in the shade of a leaf, but not itself anything like the painting of just such a puddle, a gathering of rainwater in the heel of a footprint left in the mud by a large ape or some similar creature; a sunset, a sunrise – how very different they could be, I thought with wonder as I gazed upon them, Roderick's paintings of them – how, even without the naturally telling element of time, one could so very easily tell which was a dawn, a beginning, which one an end – and amidst it all that lone portrait of a single black stag, a dark silhouette against lush green foliage, the density of the forest unable to contain or suppress the high proud head, the powerful, deadly antlers growing from the top of that noble head, that noble face, a face the same dark shade as the hand that had painted it, an almost human wisdom in the eyes as the stag stared boldly back at the painter, in those eyes a knowing recognition, as if those eyes recognized the hand that was in the process of capturing his image, as if they knew it to be the same hand that would soon enough wipe it away from the world, as though to

capture an image in nature was also to erase it, to eradicate it, as though that were the nature of the process, as some ancient peoples once believed and, as far as I know, might still very well do.

Here it all was, everything Roderick had ever seen in his life, days, weeks, months, years, decades, perhaps even centuries, millennia, great eons—I never knew Roderick's age; in his beautiful dark eyes I could believe any stretch of time, could imagine any number of ages passing before them, lit behind them, stored, contained, frozen within the four walls of this one single tiny room. Hundreds of paintings, none of them hanging from the walls, all of them resting on the floor, on a table, on the bed, framed and unframed, leaning against each other, against the walls, one of them propped up on the door, slid back now and then to allow the door to open as we passed in or out, or by some clever, careful manipulation of weights and angles allowed to fall back into place when the door was closed behind us. How carefully and yet how easily Roderick opened and closed that door, how he shifted paintings around to reveal a table, a place for a pot of tea, a few cups, a chair for a guest to sit in, without seeming to give any of it a thought, the way his paintings were ordered and re-ordered by the necessities of each moment, the way they were cast aside, set together and apart, regrouped, rearranged, the painted landscape of the room constantly shifted, changed in subtle ways without in essence failing to remain the same – such a loving disregard for his own art! I once asked him if he ever thought of selling any of his paintings; he looked at me without expression, as though the thought were, not unthinkable, but simply not at all worth considering, not something that could ever be considered; the look he gave me did not make me feel stupid for asking it, but the question seemed suddenly meaningless to me, a meaningless utterance, and it passed away naturally unanswered, politely unacknowledged, hanging only briefly in the air between us, fading instantly into nothing as soon as it was completed, as though it had never been asked at all.

Anyway, it was entirely the wrong question to ask.

'Here you are,' Faustine had come to find me, 'but what idleness is this, lying in the grass like that? Is this what you think you were employed to do? Your master will not look kindly on this. Do you think I should tell him? But what would I say?' Rosmer had returned, she said. Would I not walk with her back to the house, we could take the short cut, through the garden maze? 'Tell me, what were you thinking?'

'Nothing important—are there better thoughts to think when lying in the grass than unimportant things? I can think of no better way to spend idle thoughts than on useless things. After all, what use would it be to think idly about useful things? Idle thoughts have no use for such things, just as such things have no use for idle thoughts. They are, as they say, mutually exclusive, or so they should be! Important thoughts should be reserved for thinking in lantern light, in the middle of the night when one cannot sleep, when sleep is impossible. I assure you, I do a fair share of that kind of thinking, but no more than a *fair share*. It gives me no pleasure to think of such things when lying comfortably on a pillow of grass, when sleep is waiting just a moment away, ready to pounce, even as I hold it at bay with my idle thinking, and why should it? Perhaps others find pleasure thinking about useful things, but I am not a philosopher. You may say that I resemble one, but idlers often do. The distinction is fine, but it is there, and I am nothing but an idler, but I did not just say so!' I took Faustine's hands, boldly looked her in the eyes. 'Do not say I have said so! Do not tell my master! Though it surprises me that you should call him that—I myself have not thought to think of my employer in such terms, but surely you know better than I who have never spoken nor even laid eyes upon my employer. Well then, that is what I will call him as I implore you—do not tell my master I have called myself an idler unless you think it would be to my advantage—no, don't laugh! There are very good reasons why idlers make perfect clerks, especially clerks of the Archive; have I not done my job when called to do so, and, what's more, done it excellently? I defy you to say otherwise. Being idle means I can be called to do work at any time, for I find nothing easier than to set aside idleness. How much more difficult it would be to tear me away from thinking important thoughts! Wouldn't you think?'

Faustine looked at me with new eyes, her eyes, still, but they were eyes I had never seen before. She brushed grass from my elbows, my knees. 'Your words interest me. But do you think it would be appropriate for me to say such things to your...employer? No, clearly I could not possibly make such a report, even if it were my warrant to do so. I merely suggest that it may be to your benefit if you now and then considered what your employer might think of what you do even when you are not working, though clearly it is not in your nature to do so, to worry about what others might think. You talk of advantage, but it is clear from your tone that you couldn't care less for such things, and for this I find you as well as your words interesting. But come, walk with me. Let's say no more of it now, there will be time enough for that, I will seek you out later to talk more on the subject if you are so inclined. Rosmer waits inside.'

We arrived in silence at the foot of the main staircase; the marble statues stood at the top, no doubt indifferent to what went on in their long shadows, the house's visitors wandering lost in the geometry of the garden maze we had just crossed behind us.

'Ah, there you are,' Rosmer, as ever amiable, 'have you had breakfast? Too bad, I was just on my way to the breakfast nook. Do you mind accompanying me—the breakfast here is excellent, isn't it? Better than any other meal of the day, I always thought. Good, I'm famished, I've only just arrived, and already there's too much to do. Come on, you drink coffee, don't you? I thought we'd begin by making revisions to my last report. I don't know, an addendum may be in order, what do you think? I may have missed something in my last report; certain new developments indicate that I may have made contact. But you can never be sure, can you?'

We left Faustine behind as we walked into the house; too late I remembered to check her shadow: she was gone.

That evening we went to the village, just an hour or two away from the house by foot, through the woods—sun low, almost set, we stumbled almost blindly through the hot but rapidly cooling underbrush; the darkness, rather than dampening our spirits, invigorated us, as though it were a brisk morning instead of the end of a particularly long wearing day. I had never before spent so much time with Rosmer outside the house; perhaps the possibility, no matter how slim, of having made contact let him feel entitled to some recreation, but no, his demeanor was more urgent than ever, it was plain he knew how crucially important his next sorties would be; so it was, I suppose, all the more important for him to proceed with caution, to blunt the adrenaline edge with beer and idle conversation.

'Have you ever thought about the nature of your freedom? Not the abstract concept—though I admit I find thinking about the specific eventually leads to some unavoidable conclusions about the general—but your own, personal freedom, the practical aspects of it?' I couldn't say that I had. 'Here you are, a resident of the house, but completely at liberty to wander as far from home as you might feel like doing at any given time, any time, on a whim, whenever you feel like it. Yes, you have that freedom, you come and go as you please, wander as freely without as you do within. Where were you this morning? Where were you the day before? And before that? Where will you be tomorrow? Here we are now at a village, not too far from the house, just an hour or two's slow going through the woods, but you could go further, get up right now, walk through that door and run, run through the woods, onward and onward, find the next city, the next after that, cross the border into another country, go all speed and take a train, embark on a ship, cross the sea, find berth on some vessel that might take you to the moon, another planet, the stars, even, who knows. But what would you do when you got there? What *could* you do? The thought of it seems liberating, doesn't it? You begin in your imagination—so much potential—and yet. How does reality measure up? The truth solidifies—petrifies—the farther you go, the harder it becomes to make your way. Freedom, my freedom, I've found, in practice, tends to be asymptotic, like trying to move around with an elastic tether tied around your waist. The further you are from some point of origin, some abstract nucleus, some hidden center, the fewer choices you find available to you. Everywhere I go, the same cycle of violence and life, of violent life—in different scales, of

course, varying orders of of magnitude, but the same cycles, the same variants of the same cycles; and you can keep going, but eventually you find yourself constricted by the sameness of it all. The pull then is so great, the tether so taut you have no choice but to go back. I suppose the thing then would be to find a way to cut the cord, go forth untethered, but you have to find the tether first, don't you? You have to figure out what exactly it is you're tethered *to,* how exactly you're *tethered* to it—supposing that's even possible. It isn't the house, though it might seem like that's what I mean—the house is, however, a manifestation of it, this phenomenon, a satellite, maybe, an important one, a temporary hitching post, an anchorpoint, possibly the last one, the furthest from our true center of gravity, somewhere to fasten your tether to relieve some of the pull pressure, give yourself some slack. Beyond the house...I don't know. Sounds like nonsense, doesn't it? But I'm telling you, that's what it's like, what it feels like, out there.'

'Forgive me, I'm not entirely unfamiliar with what you mean. I've seen your reports, remember, but if I may interject—you say you want me to think of the specific, my own personal freedom, but you've been going about it backwards, haven't you, going, as it were, the other way; you forget, sir, I've been there, too, that's where I'm from, out there, as you say. True, I cannot claim to say I've walked the same paths you have, could never claim to have seen a fraction of the same things you've seen, but there you have it, right there, the very antithesis of your so-called *general conclusions*. Perhaps I lack imagination—I for one have never failed to find myself anything short of completely astounded by the variety of experience. You speak of orders of magnitude, and the more I think on it the more I think therein lies your, as it were, conundrum, for *magnitude* it seems to me is little more than an illusion of scale—a forest becomes a forest and what's more *any other* forest only when you look at it from a distance. What I mean is, inside, surely you wouldn't mistake one tree for another, an acacia for a fir, say, an oak for an elm, or indeed one hedge for another in even an untended garden—even the apparent monotone of shrubbery becomes distinctly itself upon close inspection, and through it all no matter the route you take, whether paved road or some previously untrod path—that is to say, in any case, you *make your own way* through it or in it or out of it, what's the difference, even *following in another's footsteps* you couldn't help but make your own imprints in the mud, as they say. That is, you are only ever always *making your way*, and furthermore, I might consider—have I, for one, ever participated, whether knowingly or otherwise, in any of the so-called machinations of history? What if I had? Would I then have anything wiser to say to you than the sum of my own personal experiences, whatever that means? To say to you whatever it is that is in my nature to say to you at any given moment? I might be a believer in history, I might be an activist, a revolutionary, but what would I have to say to you who have not lived what I have lived, what ideals I've proclaimed, what revolutions I have fought? Will you not then go on to find your own so-called revolutions, and what's more fight them your own way? No, do not listen to me, I have no idea what I'm saying, I have nothing to say on the matter, not anything useful nor, indeed, anything wise, it is not something to which I have given any thought, and therein I suppose lies my inherent inability to agree with your perspective, to support your no doubt carefully studied conclusions—I am only a clerk. No, I'm sorry, I do not see it, that is to say, no, I cannot agree. But neither do I find it necessary or even useful for me to do so.'

Rosmer smiled, reached across the table to squeeze my shoulder companionably—even, I dare say, affectionately, as if to say, 'no, of course not,' as if to reassure or to be in turn somehow reassured—turned, called for another round of drinks.

He left me well deep in my cups long past midnight; we had spent all night at some tavern bar, where I was now left alone with the barkeep. He left with barely a word: 'I have to go,' he said, looking around as though he were only looking for the lavatory, putting his box of matches in his pocket, leaving one last matchstick on the table between us: his move. 'Will you be paying tonight or should I put it on your tab?' The barkeep cleared away our bottles without waiting for a reply. 'One for the road?' I almost told him my companion would soon return to settle

the matter—as a clerk I receive no stipend for such expenses, at the time I still only had fifty pesos in my pockets, unless I'd left the money in an entirely different set of pockets, in a different suit—but I knew having seen the back of his head that he would not; nor, in fact, did he even believe he was expected to. 'No, I'll be going now.'

The woods at night are almost pitch black; or they were that night, the moon and stars having decided not to provide evidence of their dominion above the canopy; the arboreal dome itself had seemingly abandoned the comfortingly ambivalent fractals of daytime bowers in favor of a more sinister, jagged aspect—very much like the antlers of Roderick's stag, but dipped low, in preparation for one final, fatal charge.

Roderick, if his story is to be believed—I, for one, preferring a more pragmatic, practicable interpretation as far as the matter goes, choose not to, regardless of the pleasingly heroic dimensions the tale takes in his telling—had stalked the stag for 'three days and three nights' (or some similarly portentous, symbolic or otherwise somehow 'aesthetically appropriate' measure of time—a 'fortnight', say, but not so long, as I recall) before taking up either pencil, brush or rifle, first endeavoring, he said, to 'commit to memory every sinewy movement, each humping arc of its massive shoulders, every delicate lift of a hoof, every graceful bend of a leg, every twist of the massive neck, every thrust of the powerful jaw; even the twitches of its ears and nostrils, the dangle and sway of its prodigious genitalia, the sentient glint in its eyes'; the level of detail he sought, he said, required that he 'stick close' to the creature 'as though he were its shadow, mirroring its movements with each of [his, Roderick's] own.' He attempted to obliterate his human scent by stripping of all human accouterments, wrapping his equipment in a mud-soaked canvas satchel, eating nothing but native vegetation, even bathing himself in the creature's excrement, bravely packing a mixture of said shit and piss and woodland moss into every nook and cranny of his own comparatively diminutive naked anatomy; despite these measures, he said, the stag remained clearly fully cognizant of his presence as an interloper, yet, defiantly, perhaps even gladly—certainly, he was sure, he said, 'not without some measure of amusement'—suffered this examination. Whatever the method, Roderick's subsequent mastery of the creature's tendinous anatomy, all taut musculature wrapped around a svelte, athletic frame, is unmistakable, clearly evident in the final portrait.

Very little of the stag is visible in the portrait; in the portrait, it stands some distance from the painter's hand, in the middle of some dense jungle shrubbery: just the head, the antlers, the neck, a shoulder, a fraction of the rump, the tail, a raised hoof; but enough to convey a threatening, solid mass, so still and peaceable and yet also taut, the muscles beneath the skin twitching, ready to propel that fatal crown over the shrubbery, charge full-tilt out of the canvas. When I see the painting standing unframed in the middle of Roderick's room I almost recoil, mindful of my tender flesh, my poor, unsuspecting bowels.

How wise it was for Roderick to have put so much jungle between the stag, its deadly antlers, and the observer's eye! And yet how could it have been anything but necessary to do so?

It was almost dawn when I arrived at the house; the walk had invigorated me—or was it only the lingering edge of the last few drinks?—and I tipped my head with a smile at some early visitors, already looking well lost in the half-light of the garden maze—they followed me furtively with their eyes, but didn't dare take a step behind me, still too proud to ask for directions so early in the day. The door opened as soon as I set foot on the doorstep—a cautious crack, but no further. 'You're late.'

'Another might have said I'm early—isn't that the more typical description for this hour? But no, that would be too like a compliment, and if you would spend two words on me, it would be to admonish rather than flatter, if only by implication, isn't that so, Mlle. Faustine? Certainly the assumption I would make given our history.'

She pulled the door open wide enough for me to pass, but did not yet let me in. 'He flatters and teases me, but what makes him think I would let anyone to speak to me that way?'

I bowed gallantly low, giving her my best smile; she turned, leaving the door open behind her. I entered the house, but did not yet follow.

Standing in the lobby, leaning against the round center table beneath the massive antique crystal chandelier, 'Mme. It's Mme. Sianser. Or simply Faustine.'

'And who is M. Sianser? Have I had the pleasure? No, forgive me, I do not wish to pry. Faustine, then, since you extend to me the privilege of dispensing with honorifics.'

'You do not like honorifics? No, they give me no pleasure, either—so...reductive, aren't they? As though a person could be reduced to a title. A name is such a word, and yet—the one you are born into tends to be so much more correct. Do you agree?'

I might have; I might have said anything, if only to place myself within Faustine's so-called good graces, but I was still operating, as they say, under the influence, intoxicated with *veritas*. 'It would be hypocritical for me to speak such kindness of names. If you'll recall, I have none, I gave mine away without a second thought. Nor indeed a first—that is to say, I gave it away without a single afterthought, nor even a forethought; I gave it away and never even thought to ask for it back. What could I say, then, of names, I who treated my own as nothing more than some vestigial appendage, an appendix, what's more a diseased appendix, to be trimmed away, excised, and what's more without consequence? No, I am not offended. How could I be? But I did not mean to talk about myself, though I have little enough to offer by way of interesting conversation. Tell me, then, what interests you? I gather you were waiting—I assume you have been waiting, am I mistaken?—to talk about something in particular; what did you have in mind? Tell me that I might conduct myself in a manner more appealing to you who have been kept waiting?'

'Why does he say that? Why does he say I've been waiting for him? He flatters himself as much as he flatters me, more so, even—to think that I would have waited for anyone—for *him!* I am not kept waiting. I do not wait. I simply am, this talk of *waiting* is nonsense—yes, that's it, isn't that so?'—she continued to lean on the circular table, hands to either side, palms flat on the tabletop, fingers hanging over the edge, anchoring her loosely in place, legs crossed in front of her, at the ankles; leaning forward, tilting her body, twisting slightly at the waist, she began regarding the chandelier hanging high above her head, a little behind—'I was six; then I was seven, I remember things just so—first I was six, then I was seven. Before that, was I five? Was I four? I suspect I must have been, surely I must have been, how could I be six without first being five, or four? But then, was I ever zero? And what do I remember, then? Nothing, no memories, vague recollections, ideas maybe, hardly any thinking, a lot of doing things, yes, like a little girl, listening to a bedtime story, pretending to fall asleep, then I was seven, and the memories begin. But what are memories? It seems to me that memories are just a way of making sense of being seven and not six, or, to be more precise, of being seven and *no longer* six, now and not then, *no longer* then. And what of it? I am here now, but I may as well have been here last year. Was I here last year?'—she looked around her at the strange light, the shadow cast down on her by the statues, the steps descending from her feet; the shadow lay weightless all over her, draping her, reaching beyond her, down the steps, lying flat on the steps, following the contours, edges corrugated—'Were we here last year? You say I was waiting, have I been waiting? Has all this been here since last year, was it here all this time? When you think of now, how can you imagine it as anything other than it is?'—she placed herself on a bench, her arms straight, propping up her shoulders; she watched the reflection of the garden waver in the shallow reflecting pool, carp plucking at something on the surface, from the surface, carrying it below—'I remember. But what do I remember?'

I had Rosmer's reports written down on small pieces of paper, rectangles cut from the pages of my notebook, carefully folded together with the fifty pesos that may or may not still be there, in my pockets—I stand behind Faustine in the straight central path of the garden maze; one of her heels has broken; she leans on me, supporting

herself on my arm, looks at me with old, familiar eyes; our meeting comes to an end; I help her back into the house, up the main staircase, down corridors; she has removed her shoes; she stands before a mirror, places both feet naked next to each other on the thick carpet, sits on the edge of the bed; I look at her as she places her shoes, the broken heel next to her, by her left hip, caresses the Egyptian cotton with her empty palm; I excuse myself to file Rosmer's reports. 'You are so very diligent. Why are you so diligent?' She lies back on the bed, extends her arms out to her sides, still caressing the expensive sheets, brings her knees up together beside her, naked feet dangling over the edge. Her skirt rustles softly against her thighs.

She closes her eyes, breathing softly, as if she has already fallen asleep.

Later, I forget if I closed the door behind me. The halls of the house, for once, are empty; my hands feel empty, dangling at my sides. I walk through the house, down corridors, through doors, across empty salons, past old tapestries and paintings hanging in galleries full of dark mirrors, examining the furnishings of wood, stucco, plaster, marble, until I find a large empty circular room. Above me, a galaxy spirals infinitely slowly as time passes, time passes, stars consume their celestial fuels, burn desperately, as brightly as they can, as much as their fiery hearts their gravities their appetites allow, blinding energies, searing heat emanating from their tumultuous surfaces, surfaces that seem from a distance to the naked eye becalmed, but in fact raging, shredded by relentless solar climates, by their own velocities as they hurtle full speed down orbits that grow imperceptibly smaller, or only appear to spiral interminably in broad ellipses around an invisible center, having yet in our lifetimes to complete even one single long revolution, stars hundreds, thousands, millions of times brighter and more powerful than the sun we know, and yet even so invisible to our eyes unless rendered against the darkened ceiling, the bland, colorless interior dome of the planetarium. I take a seat near the projector at the center of the room, recline below the projected stars, stare up at them, watching lives pass as we dance around each other, never quite coming together, without hope of coming together even as we revolve in orbits that grow imperceptibly smaller, or only appear to diminish as we proceed along broad ellipses, elliptical orbits around an unknown center, the secret core of all sentient life, a lifetime never enough to complete even one single long revolution. In the darkened theater I reach for her hand, forgetting that I am alone, groping blindly I come only upon my own, my hands grasp each other, hold each other together in front of me to keep from the despair of reaching out into the impenetrable darkness, the abyss, the unknown—I made my way back to my room, fell asleep at my desk after emptying my pockets, carefully laying Rosmer's reports out before me in a pyramid, counting out the pieces of paper as I unfolded them from my pockets: seven; five; three; one. I woke refreshed a few hours later, ready to file this report, written in a tiny hand I could no longer recognize as my own on a single tiny rectangle of paper, the rest having fallen to the floor as I slept.

Appendix

Appendix A

Game 1, played by Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoëff, as X and M, respectively, from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*.

X sits at a table; M stands across from him, one hand casually inserted in a pocket. X lays out a set of matchsticks on the table between him and M: seven sticks in one row (row 1), five in the next (row 2), three in the next (row 3), one stick in the last row (row 4):

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The triangle is arranged so that the apex points to X. Each player takes a turn taking any number of sticks from any row of his choice.

Round 1, Move 1, Turn 1: M's turn:

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      |  |  |
         m
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Round 1, Move 2, Turn 2: X's turn:

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   |  |  |  |  |
      |  |  x
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Round 2, Move 1, Turn 3: M's turn:

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |
   m  |  |  |  |
      |  |
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Round 2, Move 2, Turn 4: X's turn:

Round 3, Move 1, Turn 5: M's turn:

Round 3, Move 2, Turn 6: X's turn:

Round 4, Move 1, Turn 7: M's turn:

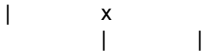
Round 4, Move 2, Turn 8: X's turn:

Round 5, Move 1, Turn 9: M's turn:

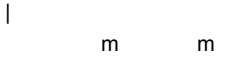
Round 6, Move 2, Turn 10: X's turn:

Round 7, Move 1, Turn 11: M's turn:

Round 7, Move 2, Turn 12: X’s turn:



Round 8, Move 1, Turn 13: M’s turn:



Round 8, Move 2, Turn 14: X’s turn:

Game ends.

Appendix B

Game 2, played by Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoëff, as X and M, respectively, from *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*.

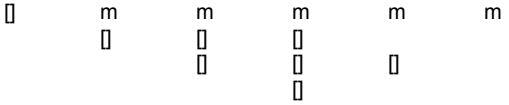
X and M play the game with rectangular wooden tiles: seven tiles in one row (row 1), five in the next (row 2), three in the next (row 3), one tile in the last row (row 4):

The apex points to X. The two men stand across from each other, at a table in what appears to be the hotel lobby, while the other revelers/audience members watch.

Round 1, Move 1, Turn 1: M's turn (chosen by X):

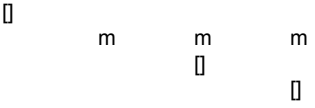
Round 1, Move 2, Turn 2: X's turn:

Round 2, Move 1, Turn 3: M's turn:

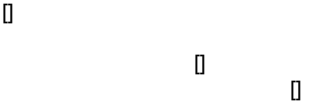


Round 2, Move 2, Turn 4: X's turn:

Round 3, Move 1, Turn 5: M's turn:



Final configuration of wooden tiles at end of Game 2, when X concedes the game:



Game ends.

Marienbad

His arrival marks an end; or, unannounced, another beginning. There have been many here; there will be many more. That is the nature of this place, after all: a point of arrivals, more than departures—few come this way in the other direction. Others, many others, even more than the arrivals, will only pass, never stopping long enough to come to ground. Come to ground and you might never leave.

He only writes for an excuse to leave the house, smoke cigarettes (the woman does not approve). Killing time, he writes story after story; occasionally, not often, we would be surprised by the appearance of his name in the literary supplement of some local paper or other. More often than not, we suspect, his contributions pass us by unnoticed: nobody reads any of them; he does not ask this of anyone. We wonder if he's read any of them himself; he writes as if he does not care.

We think he only writes what he sees, what he knows, inventing everything. Now and again someone among us would complain, saying they recognize themselves in one of the stories. 'He never asked!' they say. 'But have you read it?' They shrug; we talk about other things.

Our relationship with him is built on many such suspicions and suppositions, many contradictory: he never talks; he only talks about things no one else will; he disappears frequently; he never goes anywhere; he is always looking for something; he has nothing to say; he does not believe what he says; he is a wanted man; he has done things he will not talk about.

Someday someone will say he killed a man; we know this, we wait for someone to broach the subject, as if on a bet. Waiting for someone else to say it first, nobody does. Anyway, when they say it, it will not be true.

No one notices when he is gone.

'Where did he go?' If anybody knows, no one says anything. He asks where the woman is; someone raises an arm, a hand; points.

He walks away without saying anything else, slapping a tightly folded newspaper against his thigh. Some of us watch him go; we talk about other things.

Later, someone says, 'She won't tell him nothing.' What else could she say?

...the time has come for literature to be separated, once and for all, from cinema.

– Andrey Tarkovsky